

**ETHICS AND AMBIGUITY:
A CRITICAL STUDY
OF
CHARLES E. CURRAN'S
ECUMENICAL ETHICS OF DIALOGUE**

**By
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Abstract

This study focuses on the social ethics of the Roman Catholic moral theologian Charles E. Curran (b. 1934). For more than four decades Curran has been one of the most influential voices in the renewal of Catholic moral theology in North America. Since the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) the Roman Catholic Church has undergone changes of monumental proportion, impacting on the church's self-consciousness and requiring creative and unprecedented adjustments in its theology. The Council's commitment to "dialogue with the world" made the area of social ethics into a litmus test of the success of the church's reform. Charles Curran has developed an ethical-theological methodology, representing a revised approach to Aristotelian-Thomistic natural law theory, as a model for that dialogue with the world.

This thesis locates Curran's work in the context of the Vatican Council and of the social-ethics tradition of the Roman Catholic Church over the past one hundred years. Curran's critical response to these factors reveals the impulses and directions he develops in his methodology. His four-step method is explained in terms of its ethical and theological purposes and in relation to its intellectual roots in thinkers such as Bernard Lonergan and Karl Rahner. A major part of the thesis is devoted to four case studies, in which Curran applies his method to substantive, social-ethical questions.

This research identifies the strengths and weakness in Curran's method, pointing out the difficulty of melding a revised natural law method with the exigences of contemporary, empirical thought. The study makes recommendations for correcting inconsistencies and inadequacies of Curran's method along lines that are intellectually compatible with the work he has already completed.

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INTRODUCTION

Charles E. Curran has been a leading figure in Roman Catholic moral theology in the United States for over forty years. Evaluation by Roman Catholic and other Christian ethicists has been consistently positive.¹ Considered a “thoroughly Roman Catholic theologian by his peers,”² he was, in 1986, declared by the Vatican’s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith as “neither suitable nor eligible to exercise the function of a professor of Catholic theology.”³ Although his writings have made him a symbol of controversy in the Roman Church in the United States, these same writings appeal convincingly to the importance and value of the Roman Catholic theological, ethical tradition in his work.

The purpose of this thesis is to evaluate Curran’s contribution to the development of Roman Catholic ethics during the period following the Second Vatican Council, a period marked by the church’s commitment to develop an effective dialogue with the world.⁴ As the church’s understanding of the moral life expanded into the arena of social responsibility, its consciousness of itself as a sacrament of humankind and on pilgrimage with humanity through history grew. That self-consciousness and commitment required a reorientation of moral theology.

Although Curran is perhaps most widely known for his positions on personal morality, he has devoted a large share of his writings to issues of “social morality and its problems [involving] a more

¹ Curran was the first recipient of the John Courtney Murray award from the Catholic Theological Society of America in 1972 and has served as President of the Catholic Theological Society of America (1969-70), the Society of Christian Ethics (1971-72), and the American Theological Society (1989-90). He is a member of the editorial boards of *Eglise et Theologie*, *Horizons*, *Journal of Religious Ethics*, and the *Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics*.

² Daniel C. Maguire, “Charles E. Curran: Catholic Theologian, Priest, Prophet,” *Horizons* 29 (Spring, 2002): 120.

³ “Vatican Says Father Curran Can’t Teach Theology,” *Origins: National Catholic Documentary Service*, Washington, D.C., 28 August 1986, 203.

⁴ See *Unitatis Redintegratio* (Decree on Ecumenism) nn. 3, 23, *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery (Collegeville, Mn.: The Liturgical Press, 1975), 455 and 469-70. Although this document speaks specifically to dialogue between Christian churches, it stresses, especially in n. 23, that the Roman Church does not have all the answers for the problems facing modern society and can learn much from dialogue on the moral application of the Gospel to social living.

faithful response to the Gospel in social life.”⁵ These essays do not entail the development of a complete social ethics system, because, in Curran’s words, “from a theological perspective the more significant question concerns method—how theology should approach social questions.”⁶ Curran’s studies lead him through a detailed discussion of methodology (the theological, philosophical, personal, and historical requirements for intelligent and credible moral discourse on problems and challenges facing society today) to a structured method (an approach to discerning moral responses to particular questions).

The fundamental principles of Curran’s methodology have been already discussed and critiqued by Richard Grecco in *A Theology of Compromise: A Study of Method in the Ethics of Charles E. Curran*.⁷ One can find here a thorough study of the basic structure for Christian ethics developed and used by Curran. Grecco’s analysis focuses primarily on the impact of Curran’s method on issues of personal morality, where situations are conflicted by human sinfulness.

The focus of the present study is Curran’s method as it applies to questions of social morality. The debates and declarations of the Second Vatican Council make it clear that Roman Catholicism is intent on reaffirming its own vocation to be a leaven in society and fulfilling its mission of solidarity with all men and women in the world. This attitude is also a pledge to enter into dialogue with the world. Moral theology, as a systematic, analytic, and critical reflection on “Christian life and activity,”⁸ seeks ways to foster dialogue, identifies hindrances to it, and recommends objectives that respond more specifically to questions of social morality. Curran’s purpose in this regard is unambiguous: to free the church from the restraints that the older natural law methodology places on dialogue; to develop a method that will help the church to dialogue and collaborate with others in discerning and cooperating with God’s grace in the world; and to facilitate the Council’s desire of renewal.

⁵ Charles E. Curran, *Ongoing Revision in Moral Theology* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), 290.

⁶ Charles E. Curran, *Directions in Catholic Social Ethics* (Notre Dame Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985), 106.

⁷ Richard Grecco, *A Theology of Compromise: A Study of Method in the Ethics of Charles E. Curran* (New York: Peter Lang, 1991).

⁸ Charles E. Curran, *Transition and Tradition in Moral Theology* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), 15.

The most important theme in Curran's methodology is the paradigm shift from the classicist worldview to historical consciousness. Closely connected to this is the emphasis on the person and freedom that has been part of this transition. Moral theology, challenged by the hermeneutical questions of modernity, seeks to integrate historical consciousness, freedom, and universality into any moral interpretation of reality it wishes to propose to the world. Not having sole proprietorship of rationality and experience, the church and theology have to also be prepared to have their interpretations corrected and, in this way, to learn from as well as instruct the world. It is in this sense that theology must be ecumenical, being open to all, and dialogical, ready to enter into a rational exchange with others in order to come to the knowledge of moral truth and responsibility.

Curran responds to the challenge of modernity by developing a moral theological method that is historically conscious, personalist, and open to the self-transcending thrust of human life. Such a method exposes the connection between concrete contingent actions and the limitless human desire for the good and allows for the discovery of meanings and values, which are common to church and world and can facilitate dialogue and cooperative action. Transcendental method also implies a process of mediation. As a historical occurrence, mediation expresses for Curran the reality that the external presence of God and the unlimited openness of human beings can be joined in specific, concrete human events. As an intellectual process mediation requires Christian ethics to articulate the theological and faith-based meanings of historical, social action. Method must also be able to construe the motivations, values, principles, and actions that make moral sense both from a religious and a rational perspective, as a means of mining the potential for a closer relationship between church and world.

My intention is to critically examine Curran's writings in terms of his own purpose or project, with a particular view toward the consistency of the method itself and between the method and how it is applied. Essential to a study of ethical methodology is not the knowledge that results from the ethicist's moral inquiries, but the knowledge of how he or she arrives at his or her results.

Curran's ideas on social ethics have evolved slowly over the course of his career. He writes on a limited number of topics, but presents his thoughts in a great number of essays, over several years, making it difficult to uncover a sustained and continuous unfolding of his views. His articles follow a pattern: an

introduction of the topic, a historical overview and criticism of the traditional Roman Catholic approaches to it, a description of aspects of his own methodology, and a discussion of the implications of an altered methodology for moral theology and for the church's manner of making ethical judgments. His articles are often repetitious and changes in emphasis or development of ideas are subtle. I have taken pains to offer as complete a summary of his topical essays as possible, in an attempt to be fair to Curran, to reduce the chances of imposing my own interpretation, and to provide the reader with the opportunity to make an independent judgment about what Curran is saying. The importance of this thoroughness is also necessitated by the fact that there is no critical study of Curran's theological method specifically in relation to social ethics.

In attempting to assess what Charles Curran has contributed to the development of Catholic moral theology, it is necessary to relate his work to the expectations set for moral theology by the spirit and teachings of the Second Vatican Council and by the restlessness and hunger for change felt by so many Catholics throughout the world at that time.⁹ Toward this end this study contextualizes Curran's work with reference to the Second Vatican Council and its reception. It also carries on a critical analysis of Curran's methodological presuppositions as operative in the actual responses he makes to concrete social issues. Alfred North Whitehead has said: "Philosophy is the attempt to make manifest the fundamental evidence of the nature of things... The attempt of any philosophic discourse should be to produce self-evidence."¹⁰ In the spirit of these words, I let Curran speak for himself and leave inference for those places that remain unclear or to make connections between thoughts that otherwise might be overlooked.

Charles Curran has reflected in a systematic and critical way on Roman Catholic ethics and moral teachings not only from the vantage point of a clerical seminary, but of a Catholic University, a state supported university, and a non-Catholic private university.¹¹ Despite censure by the official leadership of

⁹ William V. D'Antonio. "Autonomy and Democracy in an Autocratic Organization: The Case of the Roman Church," *Sociology of Religion* 55 (1994): 379-396. D'Antonio shows how these expectations and changes impacted especially on how American Catholics view the moral authority of the hierarchical church.

¹⁰ Alfred North Whitehead, *Modes of Thought* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1938; New York: Free Press, 1966), 48-9.

¹¹ Following the completion of two doctorates in Theology in Rome, 1960 (Pontifical Gregorian University) and 1961 (Academia Alfonsiana), Curran taught at St. Bernard's Seminary in the diocese of

his own church, Curran continues to see himself as a Roman Catholic moral theologian. Moreover, his writings do not express the resentment of an isolated voice denouncing the Roman Catholic tradition, but the demeanor of a theologian who is confident in the strength and forward momentum of that tradition. He is also conscious of the desire of a great number of Catholics for change.

Curran's work has not come to an end. An evaluation at this time will be provisional at best. Therefore, it will be helpful to point out and analyze the main threads that reveal the coherence and development that give some unity to his admittedly diversified and non-systematic work. As the components of Curran's moral theological project appear, it becomes evident how one can use Curran's own stated objectives to gauge the measure of his contribution to the larger theological task left to the church by the Second Vatican Council.

The thesis begins with an examination of the foundations Curran lays for his method. A discussion of the significance of the movement of *aggiornamento*, a hallmark of the Second Vatican Council, supplies the ecclesial background that is a co-determinant of Curran's project. The first chapter looks at Curran's theological career from approximately 1965 to 1985. In August of the following year, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, Prefect of the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, made the decision that Curran was neither "suitable nor eligible to teach Catholic theology."¹² In view of this censure, it is helpful to examine Curran's work within the context of Catholic moral theology during those years. The second chapter contains an outline of the main features of Curran's method (stance, model, person, and decision-making) in terms both of their function and content. Curran's emphasis on historicity, personalism, and human transcendence provide the foundation for the methodological exigence of ecumenicity and dialogue.

Chapter three resumes the historical theme, connecting the general commitment of the Council to dialogue with the world with the particular task of Catholic social ethics. As moral theology works on

Rochester, N.Y. (1962-1964). This was followed by more than two decades as professor of Moral Theology at the Catholic University of America, Washington, D.C. (1964-1986). Curran has been Senior Research Scholar at the Kennedy Center for Bioethics at Georgetown University, visiting Kaneb Professor of Catholic Studies at Cornell University, Brooks and Firestone Professor of Religion at the University of Southern California, and the Goodwin-Philpott Eminent Scholar in Religion at Auburn University. In 1991 he became the Elizabeth Scurlock Professor of Human Values at Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas in 1991.

¹² *Origins*, 28 August 1986, 203.

developing a theological discourse that facilitates the desired relation with the world, it enters upon experiments with language and method that attempt to make clearer the truth of what the church is and what it must become, in order to remain faithful to its mission. The third chapter also analyzes Curran's understanding of Catholic social ethics in its modern papal tradition and as it has influenced the development of American (U.S.A.) Catholic identity and conscience. This reveals Curran's own thoughts about where that tradition has to develop and provides the conclusion for the first part of the thesis.

Since the purpose of this study is to make a judgment about Curran's social ethics and his contribution to the post-conciliar development of Catholic moral theology, it is necessary to detail Curran's expectations of Catholic social ethics and what he intends to contribute, by way of method, to making that expectation a reality. The fourth chapter lays out Curran's standards for moral theology and argues that these are also the standards by which his work can be judged. After reviewing Curran's method in relation to the tasks of social ethics, the question of a compelling and reliable theological hermeneutic of history is discussed.

Chapters five and six complete the study of Curran's social ethics methodology. In these chapters his methodological purposes are examined in how they are applied and function within a critical discussion of several urgent social issues. A more detailed analysis argues that there is a loss of consistency and coherence in his method, as Curran takes it from the realm of the theoretical to the practical. These chapters indicate the incongruence between Curran's methodology and the approach he follows in examining specific social ethical questions. Each chapter identifies several problems related to the methodological standards Curran sets and that result in a less than adequate response to the task given social ethics by the Second Vatican Council. The closing chapter of the thesis offers a modest suggestion for reclaiming Curran's methodological project. By returning to the roots of his method—Vatican II's commitment to dialogue, the transcendental method of Bernard Lonergan, and Karl Rahner's theological-eschatological reconceptualization of the church—it is possible to discover paths untaken by Curran, that are nevertheless present in his study of and contribution to theological-ethical method.

Over the past half-century, Catholic moral theology has undergone a great change, not only in style, content, and method but also in a fundamental understanding of itself as a theological discipline.

Richard A. McCormick calls it “a sea-change in moral consciousness.”¹³ Moving from a concern with producing texts and manuals for moral judgments to the open-ended exploration of feminist issues or environmental interests, for example, represents a change so great that it might be best described in the words of James M. Gustafson as an “intellectual leap.” The difference is enormous enough for Gustafson to claim that a “gulf” exists between the two conceptions of moral theology that calls for an explanation of how Catholic ethics moved from one place to the other. To account for so radical a change, he adds, requires a story “so dense and complex that perhaps no one can completely tell it at the present time.”¹⁴

No one person can be used to adequately explain the change. It was prepared by the relentless efforts of several, predominantly European Catholic theologians throughout the twentieth century: Marie-Dominique Chenu, Jacques Maritain, Henri de Lubac, Karl Rahner, Bernard Haering, and Josef Fuchs, and many others.¹⁵ What might at first seem to have been a sudden ferment in the church that embraced and expanded the ideas of Vatican II was already evident in the prior writings and meetings of movements within the church advocating a renewal of biblical scholarship, liturgical reform, and new understandings of religious life going back to the beginning of the twentieth century. The seeds of the ferment can also be found in the experiences of the worker-priest and Catholic action movements. The coming together of progressive theologians from all parts of the world, along with the media attention brought to bear on the Second Vatican Council created a kind of “resource mobilization” that fostered both the expectation of and the impetus for change in the Roman Church.¹⁶ Nevertheless, a serious study of the work of Charles E. Curran provides much insight into the turmoil, determination, and commitments that make up a significant part of the answer to Gustafson’s question.

¹³ Richard A. McCormick, “Moral Theology 1940-1989: An Overview,” *Theological Studies* 50 (1989): 19.

¹⁴ James M. Gustafson, review of *The Origins of Moral Theology in the United States*, by Charles E. Curran and *Feminist Ethics and the Catholic Moral Tradition: Readings in Moral Theology No. 9*, ed. Charles E. Curran, Margaret A. Farley, Richard A. McCormick, *America* 117 (18 October 1997): 26.

¹⁵ Joseph A. Komonchak, “Returning from Exile: Catholic Theology in the 1930s,” in *The Twentieth Century: A Theological Overview*, ed. Gregory Baum (Ottawa: Novalis, 1999), 35-48. Karl Rahner, “The Present Situation of Catholic Theology,” in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 21, tr. Hugh M. Riley (New York: Crossroad), 70-77.

¹⁶ Helen Rose Ebaugh, “The Revitalization Movement in the Church: The Institutional Dilemma of Power,” *Sociological Analysis* 52 (1991): 1-12.

CHAPTER ONE

AGGIORNAMENTO AND METHOD

Until the 1960s, Roman Catholic moral theology was isolated by its venue, its purpose, and its method. Seminaries were not usually part of any larger intellectual or academic community and were often physically as well as intellectually remote from the rest of society, academe, and the church of the laity. Moral theology's purpose was to prepare priests for the sacrament of penance, providing categories and rules of judgment that would enable them to become prudent confessors for the faithful. Natural law thinking dominated the textbooks, which were "of almost standard form and thought" and "purported to give a systematic account of Christian morality."¹

Following the Second Vatican Council, moral theology became an academic discipline within faculties of theology and religious studies. Students and professors of this new discipline were concerned with understanding the entire Christian life as a moral and ethical commitment to the world. With this shift moral theology's self-understanding changed. Curran refers to these shifts as the changing contexts of moral theology: academic, pastoral, and ecclesiastical. Such a complex and radical development does not happen by itself or all at once, even with the help of a monumental event such as a council of the universal church. These new contexts involve multiple audiences and conflicting interests and create tensions in Catholic ethics. Curran's theological work takes place within this changing tradition, seeking cures from within it and proving "that the tradition embodies change" and calls for a humble attitude of learning, as well as teaching.²

Because Curran's work spans so many years and is carried out primarily through the journal *genre*, the consistency that would make an examination of his ethical approach and positions more accessible is not always apparent. In order to uncover the unity and sense of purpose in an otherwise overwhelming diversity of writings and make it easier to recognize recurrent themes that emerge within his

¹ Vincent MacNamara, *Faith and Ethics: Recent Roman Catholicism* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1985), 9.

² Daniel C. Maguire, "Charles E. Curran: Catholic Theologian, Priest, Prophet," *Horizons* 29 (202): 121.

reflections, his work is best dealt with as a theological project. Curran's writings, generated in a context of new and changing situations, are not part of a well-conceived and executed theological plan. In some ways, his work reflects a pastoral attention and response to the experiences and issues that were emerging in the church during the time following the Council. In other ways, as an analysis of his theological project will disclose, Curran deliberately and creatively undertakes to construct a moral theology that not only helps Catholics understand themselves and their moral responsibility in a modern culture, but enables the church to carry on an ethical dialogue with that culture. In Curran's own words, "My theological growth depended very much on my response to the new and changing situations with which I came into contact and was not the unfolding of a well conceived plan."³ To situate Curran's work on social ethics it is necessary to see it in the context of this personal growth and that of the theological ferment taking place in the Catholic Church. Within this purpose, several different themes emerge, which, taken together, reveal the shape and the form of his project.

The themes are not all present from the start. Different issues become the focus of Curran's attention at different times in his career. Curran's theological journey is not unlike that of another Roman Catholic reform theologian, Hans Kueng, who wrote:

I found myself directly challenged by the task of rethinking my way through the Christian message—against the constantly changing experiential horizon of our time. In other words, I have never felt compelled as a theologian to write a learned and methodological and epistemological theory (hermeneutics) before proceeding to deal with the substance of theology. 'My hermeneutics'—in the final analysis, despite all the controversies, it has always been seeking internal Catholic and ecumenical consensus—was rather woven into the process of theological work, and it always had to prove itself, theologically and practically, in the 'stuff' of theology.⁴

Like Kueng, Curran envisions the task before him as a series of projects, developing in phases, each exhibiting a theological response to a challenge facing the church and theology at a particular period. These phases are not entirely discrete or strictly chronological; in fact, *aggiornamento* recurs as a master theme that unites all his initiatives: The phases, which overlap and intersect one another, may be described as: the issues of *aggiornamento*; the need for a new methodology; the challenge of social ethics; and the ecclesiological dimension to moral reflection and judgment within the Roman Catholic Church. These four

³ Curran, *Ongoing Revision*, 261.

⁴ Hans Kueng, *Theology for the Third Millennium: An Ecumenical View*, tr. Peter Heinegg (New York: Doubleday, 1988), xiii.

phases embody particular projects that reflect Curran's attempt to construct a religious ethics that is capable of responding to questions characteristic of each phase: 1) How can moral theology positively reflect the full meaning of the Christian vocation? How does moral theology change when it centers on creative fidelity to the call of the Gospel, rather than on the avoidance of sin? 2) What happens to a moral theology, committed to natural law theory, when it leaves behind the world-view on which that theory was founded? How does a historically conscious inquiry gain moral credibility? 3) What is a Roman Catholic ethics of the world? How does the Church live out its vocation to transform the world, when it is part of that world? 4) Can Roman Catholic moral theology be "catholic" in a doctrinal and denominational sense and still effectively dialogue with the world?

A. Curran's project in the context of Vatican II

The Second Vatican Council was unlike any previous ecumenical council. John XXIII wanted a council that would lead the Church out of the post-Tridentine epoch and bring it into a new historical phase of witness and proclamation.⁵ This purpose was called *aggiornamento* and placed before the Church the question of "what, with the help of the Holy Spirit, could the church do and what, in fidelity to the Lord, should it do, today and in a totally new situation of a multicultural world, a world that is itself put into question by a process of globalization unheard of up till now."⁶ The Pope's commitment implied establishing a positive relationship with the world that could be reached only in mutual, respectful, and open dialogue. It meant embracing history and culture in the conviction "that history, lived and experienced at any time, is a source of theological insight," even a history and culture that this same church had, since the Enlightenment, considered "depraved in its autonomous, non-authoritarian thought structures."⁷ *Aggiornamento* becomes a hermeneutic principle for recognizing "the Christian" in the events of history.

⁵ Karl Lehmann, "Zwischen Ueberlieferung und Erneuerung. Hermeneutische Ueberlegungen zur Struktur der verschiedenen Rezeptionsprozesse des Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzils," in *Herausforderung Aggiornamento: zur Rezeption des Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzils*, ed. Antonio Autiero (Altenberge: Oros Verlag, 2000), 95-6 (my translation).

⁶ Giuseppe Ruggieri, "Zu einer Hermeneutik des Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzils," in *Herausforderung Aggiornamento: zur Rezeption des Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzils*, ed. Antonio Autiero (Altenberge: Oros, 2000), 112 (my translation).

⁷ Ibid., 111.

However, events of history only become “signs of the time” when mediated by Christian faith in a way that shows how social relationships are moving in a messianic or eschatological direction. The Council did not elaborate a theological, hermeneutic method.⁸ The problem of mediation remained unresolved by a Council that was not concerned with building a general Christian philosophy of history, but with communicating with the world in a manner that would make human experience more meaningful both to the church and the world.⁹

The task the Council left to the church was enormous, the difficulty of which was further complicated by the ambiguity found in many of the council’s statements. Whether because of the complexity of the topic or the clash of theological positions and rival parties within the council, tensions could not be eliminated from the council’s documents nor resolved by the apparent consensus reached in the voting.¹⁰ “Nonetheless, these documents proposed a series of changes in the internal life of the church and in its relations to the world which possessed revolutionary sociological potential.”¹¹ Theology was left to deal “on in its own responsibility”¹² with the intellectual and spiritual underpinnings of what had happened, along with the tensions, crises, and contentious debate that necessarily and inevitably followed. The unfinished work of the council is apparent in the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World.¹³ Although the decree demonstrates the council’s desire to speak to contemporary society in the concreteness of historical and social experience, it does not address questions of method or criteria for mediating faith and human experience. The church’s customary way of addressing the world, using a natural law approach, lacked the theological phase needed to interpret the “signs of the time” in the light of Christian belief. It was, thus, necessary “to develop a corresponding theological method that would be able

⁸ Ibid., 114-5.

⁹ Ibid., 113.

¹⁰ Lehmann, “Zwischen Ueberlieferung,” 100.

¹¹ Joseph A. Komonchak, “Issues Behind the Curran Case, The Church and Modernity: From Defensiveness to Engagement,” *Commonweal*, 30 January 1987, 45.

¹² Lehmann, “Zwischen Ueberlieferung,” 105 (my translation).

¹³ *Gaudium et Spes*, in *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery (Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 1975), 903-1001.

to correctly value history, as it is actually experienced with all its specific features, as a *locus theologicus*.”¹⁴

The context of Vatican II was marked by the pressures of an intellectual world rejected by Roman Catholic teaching since the previous century. The intellectual challenge that faced the church and theology at the close of the Council was two-fold. The first was to become engaged with the broad intellectual thought structure called modernity, from which Catholic theology had retreated into what Rahner calls an “ecclesiastical autarchy.”¹⁵ Catholic theology had its own language (Latin and scholastic), its own canon of questions, and very little need or motive to change. Coming out of this isolation would take more than a simple decision; it would require a difficult shift of horizons and a painful transition in the church’s basic orientation toward the reality of the world.

The second challenge involves speaking to a world that is plural in terms of cultures, histories, economies, religions, and philosophies, while navigating Catholic beliefs through the confusing and often contradictory currents of scientific theories, academic disciplines, political models and ideologies that continue to develop throughout modernity. The new sciences and historical mindedness are an unavoidable part of that world, whose “cultural ideals and norms,” according to Lonergan, will “set its [theology’s] problems and direct its solutions” for the future.¹⁶ In this context, “a renewed theology needs a renewed foundation...[indeed] a new type of foundation to replace the old.”¹⁷ This foundation is method, because of the normative function of method in both modern science and modern philosophy. Furthermore, because the subject matter of moral theology is lived religion and human morality, method must involve “reflection on the ongoing process of conversion.”¹⁸

¹⁴ Ruggieri, “Zu einer Hermeneutik,” 113 (my translation).

¹⁵ Rahner, “The Present Situation of Catholic Theology,” *Theological Investigations*, vol. 21, trans. Hugh Riley (New York: Crossroad, 1980), 70-77.

¹⁶ Bernard F. Lonergan, “Theology in its New Context,” in *Conversion: Perspectives On Personal and Social Transformation*, ed. Walter E. Conn (New York: Alba House, 1978), 5-6.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 14.

This world of human experience is “our [the church’s] world, our destiny, that we accept, aside from which we know no other. In this dizzying world we live. We must see it as it actually is.”¹⁹ Theology begins with the experience of this world “purely and simply as the index of that milieu in which a Christian must also live and critically discern how to be a Christian.”²⁰ Thus, a renewed moral theology must be able to help the Christian make sense of the world of human experience and to distinguish between the plurality of meanings and values through which this world is mediated. Adapting to this situation brings about profound changes in moral theology’s identity: from a deductive to an empirical approach, from a perennial science to a historically conscious one, from a self-contained language to one shaped by stories, words, and images from the Bible, the Church Fathers, and “ideas worked out by historicist, personalist, phenomenological, and existential reflection.”²¹

Catholic theology was not caught totally off-guard by the Council. Renewal had already begun, cautiously and in the face of opposition from the Papacy, in the 1930s and 1940s.²² Now, however, what previously appeared as the isolated work of individual theologians, has become the task of Catholic theology, which “must resolutely and open-mindedly face the mentality of modern men and women. It cannot consider only those who are believers, but it must also consider those who doubt” the truth or relevance of the Christian story.”²³

B. *Aggiornamento*: Curran’s understanding of the need for theological renewal

Curran responds to *aggiornamento*, first by directing his attention to history and human experience as a theological *locus* in the renewal of moral theology. The questions of his earlier writings deal precisely with the experiences of both Catholics and non-Catholics in matters of personal morality (such as birth control, masturbation, divorce and remarriage, homosexuality, and premarital intercourse). Second, these questions are not simply debated within the privacy of personal conscience, but in the public

¹⁹Karl Rahner, “Der Christ in seiner Umwelt,” *Schriften zur Theologie*, VII (Einsiedeln: Benziger Verlag, 1966), 91 (my translation).

²⁰Rahner, “The Present Situation,” 72.

²¹Lonergan, “Theology in Its New Context,” 7-8.

²²Rahner, “The Present Situation,” 72-3; Joseph A. Komonchak, “Returning from Exile,” 35-48.

²³Rahner, “The Present Situation,” 76.

conscience as well, as Catholics attempt to reconcile the teachings and beliefs of their church, their own views and values, and the challenges and questions of their culture. As well, societies throughout the world were experiencing upheavals over traditional values and morals. Even when the church speaks to its members, it is heard and judged by the world with which it so urgently wants dialogue. Curran's willingness to discuss such concrete moral issues reflects his positive participation in the work that the council had set for the church. In these years Curran comes to understand and express in his writings what historians of the council have since pointed out: that *aggiornamento* was undertaken without having first worked out its models and methods, and without a definitive understanding of what it entails. Curran's criticism of conventional natural law theory and methodology and his attempts to demonstrate its inability to mediate Christian meaning in a secular world is not far from the council's thinking.

Curran's theological project has to be evaluated within the conciliar context just described. At its foundation is an attempt to think about morality in a way significantly different from how the Church had been doing this since at least the Enlightenment. His studies of particular moral issues expose both the continuing, unresolved divisions within Roman Catholicism in moral thinking, as well as the Church's theological and pastoral lack of readiness for this task.²⁴ Curran never presumes and nowhere claims to have found a replacement for the older system. Instead, he insists that a renewed theology will be pluralistic and partial, noting that it is this quality of moral theology that requires dialogue and makes sense only in dialogue.

Curran's project begins as a direct response to the Council's theological challenge and reflects the practice of moral theology in the new theological and pastoral context of the Roman Catholic Church. He focuses on the renewal of moral theology within the Catholic Church and on the questions that were on the minds of many North American and European Catholics. His first collections of essays²⁵ concern moving the new status of moral theology and the understanding of morality in the minds of Catholics. Catholic attitudes, shaped by sermons and catechisms that spoke of in terms that correspond to the categories and

²⁴ Komonchak, "Issues Behind the Curran Case, the Church and Modernity: From Defensiveness to Engagement," *Commonweal*, 30 January 1987, 46.

²⁵ Charles E. Curran, *Christian Morality Today: The Renewal of Moral Theology* (Notre Dame, Ind.: Fides, 1966) and *A New Look at Christian Morality: Christian Morality Today II* (Notre Dame, Ind.: Fides, 1968).

approach of the manuals, reflect this tradition, which presented a morality centered on sin and its avoidance.

In the introduction of *Christian Morality Today*²⁶ Curran points out the deficiencies of the manualist tradition, which approached morality with a suspicion of life and sought safety in prohibitions that fostered the notion that morality was mostly about avoiding sin. Moreover, the manuals reflected the context that produced them and the “defensive and protective attitude that characterized Catholic life.” Curran points out how that from such an approach “the gulf developed between the spiritual life of man and his daily experience in our society and world.” The council’s call for a Christian life marked by dynamism and growth implied that moral theology would have to be “open to approaches and structures that are more adapted to the changing circumstances of our times.”

Aggiornamento was moving the church from an ethics focused on types of sin (in which “legalism, extrinicism, impersonalism, and an ethic of obligation [made] conscience... negative, oppressive and sin-oriented”)²⁷ to a life-centered ethics. The council viewed Catholics as “members of the earthly city...called to form the family of the children of God even in this present history of mankind.”²⁸ Curran regards life-centered ethics as an inquiry into what one ought to do in one’s daily life “to continue the creative work of God in the world.” A life-centered morality moves from legalism and extrinsic norms of behavior to an ethics of responsibility and the norm of conscience. It aims at an integration of faith and daily living that can respond to the complexity and rapidity of change in society and help “Christians work for the good of humanity.” Life in the world becomes the place of moral responsibility and dialogue with the contemporary world, a means of comprehending what is happening from a broader perspective than that found in the neo-Scholastic cosmology.²⁹

Curran’s early writings reflect the scientific and technological breakthroughs of the 1960s and the issues they raised. The question of contraception had taken on a new urgency for Catholics in light of the medical revolution caused by the “pill.” Homosexual acts and masturbation were viewed anew in the light

²⁶ Curran, *Christian Morality Today*, ix-xx.

²⁷ Curran, *Christian Morality Today*, 16.

²⁸ *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 40, in *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery (Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 1975), 939.

²⁹ Curran, *Christian Morality Today*, Introduction.

of contemporary psychological findings. The rate of divorce and remarriage had increased among Catholics, while an enhanced appreciation of the prerequisites for the validity of sacramental marriage greatly eased the process of annulment. A more eschatologically nuanced reading of the New Testament's teaching on the indissolubility of marriage, which interprets indissolubility as an ideal of the kingdom but not always possible in the world between the two comings of Jesus, raised questions about the absolute prohibition of divorce. When the perspective of contemporary experience and the insights of psychology, sociology, medicine, pharmacology, and technology are considered, all of these moral questions take on a new look and exhibit a complexity not previously acknowledged in natural law analysis. Within the Church there is a marked shift away from legalism and moral minimalism to a morality that focuses on freedom, responsibility, conscience, and the universal call to holiness, raising the expectations among Catholics of new ways of understanding moral reality and of creatively changing how Catholics perceive and are perceived by the world.

These topics become the material for constructing a fundamental moral theology expressive of the openness of Vatican II. Curran experiments with new ways of understanding the human realities in question, seeking moral meanings that lead to different conclusions than those found in the traditional teachings. Curran's early project is defined by the pragmatic work of undoing the inhibiting force of certain ethical conceptions and assumptions in the post-Tridentine tradition, specifically the juridical understanding of conscience and the grounding of ethical norms. Curran builds his position within what Richard Grecco describes as an "awareness of the importance of history and of the techniques of the social sciences"³⁰ for accessing moral truth.

Aggiornamento views the faith tradition as a permanent source of moral knowledge, requiring a creative fidelity that binds present experience with the originary historical events that ground Christian faith. Curran finds in scripture a model of moral life characterized by the dynamic and open-ended processes of conversion and growth. It is a morality in which all humans are called to perfection, but only God can bring them to the realization of that call. Biblical morality is not about being faultless, but moving

³⁰Richard Grecco, "Bibliography: Charles E. Curran," *The Modern Churchman*. n.s. 30 (1988): 38-39.

toward an ever more faithful relationship with a gracious and loving God.³¹ A renewed understanding of the Christian moral life eschews the legalism, authoritarianism, and rationalism embedded in the manualist natural law/church law approach to morality. Instead, the themes of freedom, responsibility, conversion, conscience and growth that are found in the ethics of Jesus become part of the Christian ethical explanation of human action.³² Morality as a response to God in the concrete unfolding of life puts a new emphasis on the historical character of human life and institutions. Curran's studies of marriage, birth control, and family life are aimed at making sense out of the daily experience of Catholics and facilitating "an ever greater participation in the life and love of God."³³

A natural law view that gives short shrift to the complexity of the human situation and shows little confidence in the ability of Christians to decide on their own responsibility presents a significant barrier to the call for renewal. "The fundamental law for the Christian and for the church is the law of the Spirit, which is primarily an internal law... Obviously, here is the first source of tension in the life of the Church. The external law might not always respond to the demands of the Spirit here and now."³⁴ The natural law theory as presented in the manualist tradition, is not an apt discourse for moral reflection and stands in the way of effective *aggiornamento*. Curran's questioning is not a rejection of the tradition, but a way to "discern the true [theological-ethical] tradition of the Church"³⁵ and, rooted in this tradition, to "show the direction moral theology needs to follow in an attempt to be relevant to our contemporary world."³⁶ The renewal of moral theology pivots between the past and the future.

Curran's approach is concrete. It takes up the pastoral task of understanding the responsibilities of Christian life in contemporary society, based on a unifying perspective that bridges the gap between faith and life in the world. This position expresses his conviction that there is an objective basis for morality, but that basis does not lie in absolute norms. Working out that basis in a construal of reality and human knowing as historically mediated and relational is a central component of Curran's project.

³¹Curran, *Christian Morality Today*, 2, 8-10.

³²Curran, *A New Look*, 1-25, 25-72, 125-144.

³³Curran, *Christian Morality Today*, 133.

³⁴Curran, *Christian Morality Today*, 134.

³⁵Curran, *Christian Morality Today*, xx.

³⁶Curran, *Christian Morality Today*, 133.

Aggiornamento in moral theology cannot be naively thought of as simply starting something new. For centuries, the discipline of moral theology had tied natural law, church authority, and divine law closely together.³⁷ Curran purports to separate the moral questions from that natural law thinking which had become a roadblock to recognizing “the very complex reality of modern life.”³⁸ To advance into the future, moral theology has to deal with this moral consciousness from the past, still operative in the church.

Curran regards the manualist understanding of natural law as necessarily legalistic and “one of the prime factors for the existence of universal absolute norms” in the Catholic tradition.³⁹ Although in the broadest sense natural law simply describes the human ability to arrive at ethical wisdom through reason, the manualist view, in practice, is narrower. It sees natural law as the divine plan of creation, knowable by reason without the aid of faith.⁴⁰ It is depicted as an objective reality (the divine plan or blueprint) and a subjective one (the correspondence of reason to a moral order “out there”). Curran refers to this as a “picture book concept of reality.”⁴¹ The plan is universal and absolute, because it is set from all eternity. It is inflexible, because it was considered based on “a coherent philosophical system with an agreed upon body of [moral] content, that its norms, principles, truths and conclusions are common to all humankind, and that a good conscience is one that knows and obeys certain moral laws.”⁴²

Curran’s discussion of ethical *aggiornamento* is shaped by his response to the weight of the conservative tradition and the authoritarianism of the church. His writings self-consciously take on the purpose of dealing with the tradition and with the hierarchical structure of the Roman Catholic Church. Curran formulates a dissenting response to *Humane Vitae*, which disagrees not only with the conclusions of the encyclical, but also “the ecclesiology implied and the methodology used by Paul VI in the writing and promulgation of the document.”⁴³ The publication of *Humanae Vitae* was for Curran the “single event since

³⁷ Albert R. Jonsen and Stephen Toulmin, *The Abuse of Casuistry: A History of Moral Reasoning* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), 89-122.

³⁸ Curran, *Christian Morality Today*, 132.

³⁹ Curran, *A New Look*, 74.

⁴⁰ Curran, *A New Look*, 86-7.

⁴¹ Curran, *A New Look*, 243.

⁴² Curran, *A New Look*, 74-79.

⁴³ “Text of the Statement by Theologians,” *New York Times*, 31 July 1968, 16.

Vatican II that has most affected my theological work,”⁴⁴ setting his theological agenda for most of the next ten years.⁴⁵ Dissent to the encyclical, moreover, was “the singular event causing the greatest stir and having the most far reaching effect on the future of the church.”⁴⁶ As editor or co-author of four books dedicated to clarifying this dissent, Curran issues a staccato of challenges to the papal teaching, particularly aiming at: natural law methodology, an authoritarian ecclesiology, and the meaning of and right to dissent to authoritarian papal teachings.⁴⁷

Curran argues that the papal appeal to universal moral principles ignores the complexity and actuality of the lived experience of Roman Catholics. A more credible response would require “a dialogue with the natural and social sciences, the modern philosophies, the changed understanding of man and his place in the universe, and contemporary human experience,” resulting in a change in the older teaching on “negative, absolute norms of conduct” in general and regarding contraception in particular.⁴⁸ For Curran, the “inadequacies and insufficiencies of the reasoning employed in *Humane Vitae*” include the issue of authoritarianism. Consequently, the reform of moral theology includes the development of the laity’s right to dissent, the “responsibility to respond to such teaching [so that] truth and the credibility of the church’s teaching are better served.” Dissent is neither a sign of disloyalty to the church nor the preserve of theological experts. “There are sufficient reasons for ordinary Catholics and not just theologians to reject the conclusions of *Humane Vitae*.”⁴⁹ The process of making Catholic morality more life-centered requires an internal dialogue in the church, not only about ethics but also about the “theological presuppositions of the encyclical [that] are a controlling influence on the theological methodology and arguments employed.”⁵⁰ The renewal movement in moral theology will confront a “static notion of [the church as] a

⁴⁴ Charles E. Curran, “Challenge of Pluralism,” *Commonweal* 108 (30 January 1981): 45.

⁴⁵ Curran, *Ongoing Revision*, 269.

⁴⁶ Charles E. Curran, ed, *Contraception: Authority and Dissent* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969) vii.

⁴⁷ Charles E. Curran, ed., *Absolutes in Moral Theology?* (Washington, D.C.: Corpus Books, 1968); *Contraception: Authority and Dissent* (1969); Charles E. Curran, Robert E. Hunt, et al., *Dissent In and For the Church* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1969); Charles E. Curran, Robert E. Hunt, Terrence R. Connolly, et al., *The Responsibility of Dissent: The Church and Academic Freedom* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1969).

⁴⁸ Curran, *Absolutes*, 16.

⁴⁹ Curran, *Contraception*, 10-14.

⁵⁰ Curran, *Dissent In and For the Church*, 123.

perfect society, structured in a downward pyramid, [that inhibits development of]... a more dynamic notion of the pilgrim people of God who, precisely as pilgrims, are always on the move toward the new heaven and the new earth and always in need of reform.”⁵¹

Although many Roman Catholic Episcopal Conferences acknowledged a right to dissent, they did not conceive of this as public dissent, which was rare in the Roman Catholic Church. Curran, however, has serious reasons to respond publicly:

The fact that *Humanae Vitae* concerns... a matter of immediate and urgent practical consequences for millions of persons, both Catholic and non-Catholic, placed the subject matter, of its very nature, into the forum of public concern. It thus involves the ‘right to know’ and the correlative ‘duty to inform’ pertaining to a category of persons coextensive with the audience of the mass communication media.⁵²

Roman Catholic ethics has, according to Curran, ecumenical and public requirements that are fulfilled in open dialogue.⁵³

The debate over *Humane Vitae* “set the future agenda for moral theology in four important areas: sexual ethics, natural law, the existence and grounding of norms and dissent from authoritative hierarchical teaching.”⁵⁴ On a practical level, the issues relate to the structures and functions within the church that narrow the church’s learning and teaching functions into a simplified dichotomy: the hierarchy teaches and the membership learns.⁵⁵ Curran challenges what has been described as “creeping infallibility”⁵⁶ or the usurpation by the hierarchical *magisterium* of the teaching function entrusted to the whole church.⁵⁷ In raising the issues of dissent and authoritarianism, Curran sees himself in accord with Vatican II. He regards the teaching function of the church as a charism given to the church as a whole. The sharp division between *ecclesia docens*, (the teaching function of the church assigned to the jurisdiction and competence of the hierarchy) and *ecclesia discens* (the learning-obeying role that is assigned to the laity) obscures the faith-

⁵¹ Curran, *Dissent*, 217.

⁵² Curran, *Dissent*, 142-3.

⁵³ Curran, *Dissent*, 219; *Contraception*, 18.

⁵⁴ Curran, *Christian Morality Today*, 107.

⁵⁵ Charles E. Curran, *Themes in Fundamental Moral Theology* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press: 1977) 11.

⁵⁶ Margaret O’Gara, “Shifts Below the Surface: Ecumenism, Dissent, and the Roman Catholic Church,” *The Jurist* 56 (1996): 385; Richard McCormick, *The Critical Calling: Reflections on Moral Dilemmas Since Vatican II* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1989), 82-3.

⁵⁷ Charles E. Curran, *Contemporary Problems in Moral Theology* (Notre Dame, Ind.: Fides Dome, 1970), 259-262.

reality that “the primary teacher of the Church remains the Holy Spirit who dwells in the hearts of the faithful and in all people of good will.”⁵⁸ The natural law teaching insists on sources of ethical wisdom apart from faith and scripture that are accessible to all without the necessity of faith for their proper understanding. If the teaching function of the church, which it enjoys by reason of the grace of the Holy Spirit, is not exhausted by the *magisterium*, but is instead shared with non-office holders within the church and also non-members of the church, then the *magisterium* cannot narrow ethical competence to itself. Instead, the hierarchical teaching office needs to find ways to learn from those others sources and competences, by changing “the methodological approach to the way in which papal teachings are studied and proposed.”⁵⁹

Aggiornamento takes on a meaning for Curran not anticipated by the council: that of dissent as a dynamic element in the church’s search for moral wisdom. Aware that “in the context of this unrest, conflicting forces polarize within the church,”⁶⁰ Curran resists the temptation to claim for theology an “alternate *magisterium*” within the church and delves into the moral theological tradition to find there alternatives to what he regards as the papal construal of morality. He continues to write on questions of personal ethics, but employs a historical perspective in order to more sharply criticize the weaknesses of the manualist approach to natural law, to argue for the possibility of change in Catholic moral teaching, and to demonstrate that dissent within the church can often be an expression of faithful responsibility.

Curran supplements his historical studies through “dialogue” with the insights of the Protestant tradition and of contemporary philosophy and science. The value Curran places on human experience as a source of ethical wisdom underscores the importance of dialogue as a means of access to moral truth.

The willingness to accept the ability of man to arrive at moral truth, together with an historical worldview, implies the need for continuing dialogue ever incorporating contemporary human wisdom with the critical realization that such wisdom must always be put to the test.⁶¹

To find a reliable method to adjudicate the truth claims of divergent ethical conclusions, to deal with the increasing frequency of dissent and “a growing pluralism in the Roman Catholic Church,” the

⁵⁸ Curran, *Themes*, 111.

⁵⁹ Curran, *Themes*, 115; see also McCormick, *Critical Calling*, 101.

⁶⁰ Curran, *Dissent*, vii.

⁶¹ Charles E. Curran, *New Perspectives in Moral Theology* (Notre Dame, Ind.: Fides, 1974), 46.

church will have to become a community of moral discourse.⁶² The unity of truth will not “be found in terms of absolute agreement on...specific moral teachings,”⁶³ but in the joint process of dialogue.⁶⁴ Curran offers some tentative models of ecumenical and dialogical method in a series of “dialogues”: with the medical community, with other sciences, with Protestant theology, and with the church itself.⁶⁵ These dialogues aim not only at showing that all Catholics share in the teaching office of the church, but that the church must share in the moral wisdom of the world. A renewed Roman Catholic moral theology has to contribute to opening the church to this conversation so that it can hear God’s call in the signs of the time. For Curran this challenge involves a re-evaluation of the theological presuppositions and methodology at work in the church’s moral reasoning. A method of verification, therefore, will have to facilitate the requirements of ethical dialogue.

⁶² See Richard A. McCormick, “Moral Theology 1940-1989,” 12. Here McCormick notes that dissent to *Humane Vitae* cannot be interpreted as a defiant *hubris*, but indicates a recognition of the need to discuss some very important questions “about the formation of conscience, about the response due to the ordinary magisterium, about the exercise of authority in the Church, about consultative processes and collegiality, about the meaning and guidance of the Holy spirit to the pastors of the Church.”

⁶³ Curran, *Ongoing Revision*, 282.

⁶⁴ Curran, *Dialogue*, 259.

⁶⁵ Charles E. Curran, *Dialogue* (1972); *Medicine and Morals* (Washington, D.C.: Corpus Books, 1970); *Politics, Medicine and Christian Ethics: A Dialogue with Paul Ramsey* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1973).

CHAPTER TWO

FAITH AND REASON: CURRAN'S ECUMENICAL METHOD

Previously in moral theology there was a tight, somewhat authoritatively proposed methodology, which obviously had its own distinct characteristics. Today there is a realization that there can be many possible methodologies and theologians are searching for more adequate ethical methodologies.¹

Curran's methodological project moves in a direction that attempts to embrace all human experience without losing the particular perspective contributed by Christian faith. The term "ecumenical" describes Curran's conviction of the autonomy of ethics as a universal human endeavor and possibility. An ecumenical ethics is open to all, accepts a diversity of opinions and views, and is inclusive of every aspect of human living. As an expression of renewal, ecumenical ethics suggests that the church has to become a learner, in order to teach.²

The particularity of Roman Catholicism includes warrants for the universalism and autonomy of ethics, according to Curran, which are found in an ecclesiology that recognizes the Holy Spirit as "the primary teacher in the church ...[dwelling] in some way in all persons of good will."³ This underscores the "important theological significance of the experience of people"⁴ as a source of moral knowledge. Salvation and grace are universally accessible in human experience. All persons share in the goodness of creation and suffer under sin and human limitation.

At the basis of Curran's project of revising natural law theory is an ecumenical vision that is open both to the historical and relational dimension of nature (especially human nature) and inclusive of the supernatural dynamic of history (as expressed in Christian belief). Natural law becomes an ethics of human experience, which is always an interpreted event or occurrence. Reality mediated by meaning is, in fact, mediated by a plurality of meanings and of ethical interpretations of reality. Curran sees in method a way of

¹ Curran, *Dialogue*, 264.

² Curran, *Ongoing Revision*, 46.

³ Curran, *Ongoing Revision*, 47.

⁴ Curran, *Ongoing Revision*, 57.

examining the complex plurality of meanings that give ethical significance to reality, working from an intellectual assumption that Christian revelation is able to expose the full human significance of what is happening and at stake in all human living.

A. Searching for a more adequate methodology

Curran's project develops gradually. Dissatisfied with the natural law theory as put forward in *Humanae Vitae*, he searches for a different approach for understanding the human situation and its ethical claims. Curran is concerned not with giving legitimacy to his controversial positions, but on the credibility and intellectual integrity of moral theology.⁵ Moral theology was only beginning to discover how to overcome a century of distance from the intellectual, political, social, and philosophical movements characteristic of modernity. To come out of this isolation, theology had to learn to speak in a culturally and historically new language.

Curran's commitment to method is a response to the intellectual breakthrough of the Second Vatican Council, to the social-moral upheavals of the 1960s, and the growing interest in ethics both within and outside the church. This purpose "seemed [to Curran] expedient at that time," because of the need to show that the newer approaches and the call for change has methodological legitimacy.⁶ It was time for critical reflection on the variety of models and paradigms, assumptions and approaches that had developed since the Council, in a way that could affirm the contribution of and encourage dialogue among such a plurality of methods and theories. Concentrating on methodology was a means of finding common ground among divergent theologies and between Christian faith and the good will of others, through shared ethical values and commitments. Finally, Curran's turn to method was a way of finding alternatives to the authoritarian manner "in which the Roman Catholic church understands and carries out its teaching function in the area of morality."⁷

⁵ The Fathers of Vatican II express their own conviction that the credibility of the church as a moral teacher requires a dialogical and cooperative orientation, especially in regard to the social problems experienced in the world. See *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 3, n. 11, *Vatican II*, 905-05, 912.

⁶ Curran, *Ongoing Revision*, 274.

⁷ Curran, *Ongoing Revision*, 33.

This task involves a thorough rethinking of the nature and role of Christian ethics and of the challenges this poses to moral theology. During the period from 1970 to 1985, Curran published nearly one hundred articles, sixteen books, and co-edited with Richard A. McCormick four collections of *Readings in Moral Theology*. Thematic throughout these writings is the issue of method. The essentials of this project are gathered together in *Themes in Fundamental Moral Theology* (1977) and republished, with some additions and changes as *Directions in Fundamental Moral Theology* (1985).⁸

Curran takes up the challenge of method to counter “the ecclesiology implied and the methodology used by Paul VI in the writing and promulgation of the document.”⁹ Richard Grecco observes that *Humanae Vitae* significantly influences Curran’s project by generating a set of issues that become paradigmatic of the kinds of questions with which he deals in his subsequent theological writings. “The paradigm (i) emphasized the experience of the people as a *locus theologicus* (ii) challenged the natural law method (iii) challenged the role of the *magisterium*.”¹⁰

Curran’s purpose in concentrating on method unfolds in a series of concerns about natural law. First, he addresses the inherent dualism in traditional natural law theory. Second, he attempts to open moral theological investigation through “dialogue with modern philosophical thought, with the natural and social sciences, contemporary human experience and man’s understanding of himself in the modern world.”¹¹ Third, he works on creating a scholarly structure for the discipline of moral theology, in order to give it academic credibility and facilitate constructive dialogue and exchange not only among the wide variety of approaches and viewpoints within the Roman Catholic church, but with other ethical theories.¹²

1. Nature and the supernatural: Discovering historical unity. What Curran considers the inherent dualism of natural law can be overcome by learning to speak theologically about human experience, but requires

⁸ Charles E. Curran, *Directions in Fundamental Moral Theology* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985).

⁹ “Statement of Theologians,” 16.

¹⁰ Richard Grecco, *A Theology of Compromise*, 67.

¹¹ Curran, *Medicine and Morals*, Introduction; Curran, *Absolutes*, 16.

¹² Curran, *Contemporary Problems*, 104; *New Perspectives*, 56; *Ongoing Revision*, 286; Grecco, *A Theology of Compromise*, 4.

new “categories of interpretation [that have] to be more personal, historical and relational than before.”¹³ In order to develop these categories, Curran engages in what Lonergan calls a “task guided not by abstract generalities but by practical intelligence generated by the self-correcting process by which also we acquire what we call common sense.”¹⁴ Historical consciousness, the historicity of reality and knowledge, the personalist and relational nature of morality, and the need for a transcendental approach to understanding human nature and human knowing are ideas and models that Curran has learned from others and applies to his own methodological research.¹⁵ By integrating the insights of others into his work, Curran specifies and clarifies what he is trying to do as a natural law revisionist and in working out the ethical relationship between Christian faith and daily living.¹⁶ This openness to contemporary thought is at the service of his fundamental position: human beings can, through reason, arrive at ethical wisdom and truth through a historical, heuristic process of reflection on human experience.

Curran lays out the foundations and parameters for revised methodology in three foundational articles: “Natural Law and Contemporary Moral Theology,”¹⁷ “Dialogue with Humanism: Is There a Distinctively Christian Ethic?”¹⁸ and “Dialogue with the Scriptures: The Role and Function of the Scriptures in Moral Theology.”¹⁹ The themes of these articles are subsequently repeated and expanded, but these three indicate the direction he will follow in his methodological project. Curran is not opposed to the

¹³ Edward A. Malloy, “The Ethics of Responsibility--A Comparison of the Moral Methodology of H. Richard Niebuhr and Charles Curran,” *The Illif Review* 34 (1977): 26.

¹⁴ Bernard F. Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), 149.

¹⁵ Curran relies strongly on Lonergan for his epistemological explanation of historical consciousness and turns to John Courtney Murray’s work on church and state for concrete applications to moral questions. See Curran, *Contemporary Problems*, 119-121. The movement away from legalism in Catholic theology toward a more personalist and dynamic understanding of morality Curran attributes to Bernard Haering, “who almost single-handedly pointed Catholic moral theology in new directions in the pre-Vatican II church.” Curran, *Ongoing Revision*, 264. See Curran *A New Look*, 145-157. Curran also acknowledges his indebtedness to H. Richard Niebuhr for the relational-responsible model, for example, see Curran, *Contemporary Problems*, 235; *Dialogue*, 104-5. Curran’s use of the transcendental method builds on theological-anthropological insights in the works of Karl Rahner and Emerich Coreth (see *Contemporary Problems*, 140-142) and, especially, the research of Lonergan in relation to heuristic process and conscience, see *Dialogue*, 220-244.

¹⁶ See Curran, *A New Look*, 159-175. *Politics, Medicine, and Christian Ethics: A Dialogue with Paul Ramsey* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1973); *Ongoing Revision*, 229-259; *Contemporary Problems*, 225-268; and *New Perspectives*, 4-46.

¹⁷ Curran, *Contemporary Problems*, 97-158.

¹⁸ Curran, *Dialogue*, 1-23.

¹⁹ Curran, *Dialogue*, 25-64.

concept of natural law, but insists that natural law theory must be revised to meet the intelligible requirements of modern thought. The encyclical's "absolute moral prohibition of certain actions which are defined primarily in terms of the physical structure of the act,"²⁰ fails the test of intelligibility, because of its understanding of nature and the meaning of natural law.

Curran finds the understanding of nature in traditional natural law theory to be theologically and philosophically inaccurate. Theologically, it assumes the existence of supernatural and natural realities that complement but are separate from each other. Philosophically, nature is an ideal construct, based on the classicist definition of knowledge, in which true knowledge of an object or of the cosmos as a whole is found in understanding their essence, apart from all accidents of history and relation. Theologically, in this approach reality is not understood "in the light of the total horizon of the Christian faith commitment--creation, sin, incarnation, redemption, and *parousia*." Nature, as essence, or a purely natural order does not exist. All reality is both touched and "relativized by the entire history of salvation." *Humanae Vitae* absolutizes "the realm of the natural as something completely self-contained and unaffected by any relationships to the evangelical or supernatural."²¹

Philosophically, the neo-Scholastic construal of natural law sees reality from an essentialist perspective, whose moral cosmology is unaffected by changing historical circumstances. Thus, by insisting that the generative process, once begun, may not be interrupted without violating the moral order, the encyclical ignores the history of human interference with nature and "tends to identify the moral action with the physical and biological structure of the act." It treats this order of nature as an absolute norm (God's design) "written into the very nature of the conjugal act,"²² making absolute a moral theory that ought to remain "provisional and relativized by the entire history of salvation."²³ This concept of natural law reflects one culturally and historically conditioned philosophical understanding of nature, which

²⁰ Curran, *Contemporary Problems*, 147.

²¹ Curran, *Contemporary Problems*, 100-101. .

²² Curran, *Contemporary Problems*, 137.

²³ Curran, *Contemporary Problems*, 101.

identifies the natural order with the moral and divine order. It oversimplifies and distorts the reality it is trying to judge.²⁴

Curran's attempt to recover the usefulness of natural law asserts that there is moral wisdom outside explicit Christian faith, but denies that this wisdom is purely natural or subjective knowledge. There not only exists "a source of ethical wisdom and knowledge which the Christian shares with all mankind," but morality known by reason cannot be merely "the subjective whim of an individual or group of individuals."²⁵ A theologically informed natural law approach will rest on "the ontological foundations of historical development...[and] the uniqueness of the once-for-all event of Christ."²⁶ The uniqueness of the Christ-event explains for Curran the universality of grace and the religious context of morality. A revised natural law theory that is built on an understanding of nature experienced historically, holds a single human history: salvation history. Although historical knowledge reflects the partiality of particular experience and only provisionally and in a relative manner is able to reflect the will of God at any point in our human history,²⁷ it is not without its ontological moorings.

Curran does not provide a detailed proof for or explanation of the ontological foundations of historical development, but refers to Lonergan's exposition of the shift from the classical (and scholastic) worldview to historical mindedness. A historical understanding of reality is significant for natural law theory, because it shifts the meaning of nature from the abstract and ideal (to which time and history are mere accidents) to the concrete and empirical (including relationships and change, for which time and history are constitutive). Nature is nature in process and relationship, but also constituted by meaning. In Lonergan's words, "human reality, the very stuff of human living, is not merely meant but in large measure constituted through acts of meaning."²⁸ Historical human communities are shaped by common experience, meaning, and judgments of truth and value that bring them together in worldview and ethos. Community, in turn, shapes culture, "which is the hard won fruit of man's advancing knowledge of nature, of the gradual

²⁴ Curran, *Dialogue*, 169.

²⁵ Curran, *Contemporary Problems*, 138.

²⁶ Curran, *Contemporary Problems*, 135.

²⁷ Curran, *Contemporary Problems*, 116.

²⁸ Bernard Lonergan, *Collection: Papers by Bernard Lonergan, S.J.*, ed. Frederick E. Crowe (Montreal: Palm Publishers, 1967), 255.

evolution of his social forms and his cultural achievements.”²⁹ Historically-consciousness truth claims are not self-evident, however, and with the shift from classicist to modern thinking comes the need for philosophy to learn “the difficult art of acquiring historical perspective, of coming to understand how the patterns of living, the institutions, the common meanings of one place and time differ from those of another.”³⁰ A historical approach to natural law ethics will differ markedly from its older predecessor. Whereas the classicist mind wanted to move deductively “from the abstract and universal toward the more concrete and particular...applying a variety of universals to concrete singularity,”³¹ historical mindedness moves inductively, beginning with things the way they are, attending to the concrete and particular, and valuing “the exercise of freedom, initiative, and creativity”³² over the classical values of necessity, causality, and immutability.

The theological implications of historical consciousness are significant, because the church has developed many of its doctrines and moral teachings in the language and meanings of the classicist world. The classicist paradigm is “not theological” but cultural³³ and expresses its culture as much as it articulates what it believes. With its attention focused on nature, God becomes known to the classicist mind “as the ground and end of the material universe...[and so] the heavens show forth the glory of God.”³⁴ However, in a culture that sees the human person as the maker of the human world, as co-creator or even maker of oneself, the historical process overshadows the givenness of nature. Theologically, the notion of a divine revelation takes on the meaning of “God’s entry and his taking part in man’s making of man. It is God’s claim to have a say in the aims and purposes, the direction and development of human lives, human societies, human cultures, human history.”³⁵ The classical paradigm understands the person primarily and essentially as rational animal, “subject to natural law, which, in accord with changing circumstances, is to

²⁹ Lonergan, “The Transition From A Classicist World View to Historical Mindedness,” in *Law for Liberty: The Role of Law in the church*, ed. J. E. Biechler (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1967), 129

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid., 127-8.

³² Ibid., 129.

³³ Lonergan, “Theology in its New Context,” 8.

³⁴ Ibid., 9.

³⁵ Ibid.

be supplemented by positive laws.”³⁶ In the historical apprehension of humankind and personhood, “intentionality, meaning [become] a constitutive component of human living,”³⁷ providing ontological and ethical foundations for the development of history “in the structural features of the conscious, operating subject, by a method that has come to be named transcendental.”³⁸

Curran believes that a historicist construal of natural law overcomes the nature-grace dichotomy inherent in the older version. By approaching nature as human experience, historically lived and mediated by meaning and as history that transpires within the relational and self-communicating reality of God, Curran posits a single history of human living and divine salvation. He approaches ethical reflection confident of integrating the ontological foundations of historical development with the once-for-all significance of the Christ-event. This understanding and approach to ethical reflection directly confronts the paradigm of morality that is at the foundation of the church’s moral teachings. The implications of this confrontation play themselves out not only in abandoning the classicist construal and use of natural law in ethics, but in setting standards of credibility for any attempt at a new methodology.³⁹

2. *Contemporary thinking and the dynamic basis for human judgment.* Curran does not regard natural law as a source of ethical content, but a formal principle and heuristic of moral understanding. A heuristic approach moves specifically to a cognitional process that facilitates the dynamic movement of consciousness, rooted in the self-transcending process of conversion, placing “greater stress on the knowing and deciding structures of the authentic Christian subject.”⁴⁰ Moral inquiry embodies an inductive, *a posteriori* approach that starts with the concrete, particular event or experience. A different understanding

³⁶ Lonergan, *Collection*, 261.

³⁷ Lonergan, “The Transition From A Classicist World View,” 130.

³⁸ Ibid. If one understands the human being as concrete and historical, then the foundations of anthropology, ethics, or theology cannot be abstract and unchanging. Nevertheless, in order to avoid sheer relativism, these foundations must provide some criteria for judging the good and assessing human development. Lonergan argues that the criteria are to be sought in the structure of knowing and deciding. Because this structure is invariable in every person, in every authentic cognitive act, it transcends the particular process, i.e. it is true for every process. Because the intentionality or thrust of human cognition is an unrestricted desire away from self-centeredness toward a relationship with the unlimited and unconditional (ultimately God) this movement must also be described as self-transcending. Thus, the method that elucidates and verifies these foundations is called transcendental. Lonergan’s understanding of transcendental method along with that of Karl Rahner will be elaborated later in this chapter.

³⁹ Curran, *Contemporary Problems*, 119, ff.

⁴⁰ Curran, *Contemporary Problems*, 141.

of nature and of reality requires a different approach to discerning the moral demands contained in that reality.⁴¹ The ethicist, according to Curran, “observes and experiences and then tentatively proceeds to...conclusions.”⁴² Curran regards this method not only as a requirement of the contemporary worldview, but a constructive response to the Second Vatican Council, which “frequently speaks of the need to know the signs of the time” in coming to discern the moral demands of Christian life.⁴³

By incorporating an understanding of the world and nature as “changing, developing, evolving, and historical,” a string of methodological consequences comes into play. Moral knowledge will be open to change and development, which give it a provisional and incomplete character that includes the possibility of error and excludes the pretense of absolute certitude. Moral knowledge will be arrived at inductively, through a heuristic approach, since “the morality of particular actions cannot be judged apart from human experience.”⁴⁴ The importance of human experience will require a closer dialogue between ethics and the empirical and social sciences. Because of the dynamic and changing quality of historical reality and the emergent character of meaning that accompanies it, law, ecclesiastical and civil, will have a lesser role in guiding moral behavior. Finally, because reality will be “understood only in terms of the relations that exist among the individual things,”⁴⁵ moral knowledge will be understood in terms of relationships. Curran’s use of historicity in ethics relativizes the conclusions of not only the church, but any other ethical reflection of the past; limits the use of moral norms, previously thought to be absolute; and calls for a method that is open and flexible, seeking “the meaning of human existence creatively in [one’s] own life and experience.”⁴⁶

Again, Curran turns to Lonergan to explain the basics of human knowing and judgment within a historical worldview.⁴⁷ As classical culture has given way to modernity, the approach to understanding reality has also changed. Classical culture sought to know reality in universal definitions. Abstracting from the particular, accidental, and contingent aspects of experience it insisted that knowledge, in distinction

⁴¹ Curran, *Contemporary Problems*, 131-136.

⁴² Curran, *Contemporary Problems*, 119.

⁴³ Curran, *Contemporary Problems*, 121.

⁴⁴ Curran, *Contemporary Problems*, 127.

⁴⁵ Curran, *Contemporary Problems*, 132.

⁴⁶ Curran, *Contemporary Problems*, 135.

⁴⁷ See Lonergan, “The Transition from a Classicist World View,” 126-136.

from mere opinion, had to be true, certain, necessary, and universal. In order to attain this knowledge, the classical worldview had to ignore “the multiplicity and variety, the development and achievements, the breakdowns and catastrophes of human living, [which] all have to be accidental, contingent, particular, and so have to lie outside the field of scientific interest as classically conceived.”⁴⁸

Modern culture focuses on the experience of enormous changes in the world brought about by human activity. Modern consciousness is aware of and wants to give an account of these changes (not only in nature, but in humanity itself), therefore creating “a new context or horizon within which [new ideas] were expressed, developed, related.”⁴⁹ This view, which recognizes and takes seriously the differences between “then” and “now,” sees historical process as a constitutive dimension of reality and knowing. It is something real and has to be part of a “complete explanation of all phenomena... Not abstract man, [therefore] but, at least in principle, all the men of every time and place, all their thoughts and words and deeds, the accidental as well as the essential, the contingent as well as the necessary, the particular as well as the universal, are to be summoned before the bar of human understanding.”⁵⁰ In contrast to the classicist meaning, “knowledge,” as understood by modernity, is ongoing, open-ended, process-driven, existential, and historical.

Cautious about charges of relativism, Curran stresses that a historically conscious ethics finds its ontological foundations in the “objectivity” of the transcendental structure of human responsibility (experiencing, understanding, reasoning, and deciding) and intentionality and in the unity of profane and salvation history. Thus, ethics is “concerned primarily with the manner in which an authentic Christian person makes his ethical decisions and carries them out...[and] the knowing and deciding structures of the authentic Christian subject.”⁵¹

Obviously, historical mindedness alone does not constitute a systematic and reflective study of morality. To construct a viable ethical theory moral theology has to incorporate and develop “different philosophical approaches to the understanding of morality...personalism, a relational and communitarian

⁴⁸ Ibid., 262.

⁴⁹ Lonergan, “Theology in Its New Context,” 4.

⁵⁰ Lonergan, *Collection*, 262.

⁵¹ Curran, *Contemporary Problems*, 141.

approach, a transcendental methodology.”⁵² For Christian ethics to effectively help persons make authentic moral choices, a methodology is needed that puts emphasis on the person who is experiencing reality.

Curran insists, on the one hand, that a new methodology will maintain a reliance on the unique and unrepeatable character of the Christ event and, on the other hand, on the validity of the claim that human reason, without the light of faith, can and does have access to ethical truth. In view of the historical nature of knowledge, there is always a *novum* that makes the present set of circumstances unique and requires creativity and responsibility leading to self-transcendence. In this regard, no particular norm is perennially absolute or particularly Christian. However, moral reflection can be informed by a Christian consciousness (meaning or interpretation) of reality. Curran thus raises the question of the uniqueness of Christian ethics. Curran proposes a Christian hermeneutic of human experience (not exclusively of faith experience) to bring these two worlds together—a task that Curran believes the traditional view was unable to accomplish. “The natural law approach based on a separation between nature and supernatural, although such a theory calls for a social ethic common to all mankind, cannot be admitted in contemporary theology, since it does not adequately solve the nature-grace relationships.”⁵³

Curran rejects a distinctively Christian ethics. “This is the precise sense in which I deny the existence of a distinctively Christian ethic; namely, non-Christians can and do arrive at the same ethical conclusions and prize the same proximate dispositions, goals and attitudes as Christians.”⁵⁴ In order to adequately describe reality to the contemporary world, one must posit that Christians and non-Christians share a human manner of making moral judgments.⁵⁵ The belief that “redemption embraces the entire world”⁵⁶ excludes the notion of the world and human knowing and willing as an area of nature untouched by grace. Thus, what in the past was considered “merely” natural, may in fact be influenced by the, albeit unconscious and unacknowledged, presence of grace in the life of the non-Christian and non-believer. If “creation and redemption are neither opposed nor totally separated but rather redemption brings creation to

⁵² Curran, *Contemporary Problems*, 139.

⁵³ Curran, *Contemporary Problems*, 11.

⁵⁴ Curran, *Contemporary Problems*, 20.

⁵⁵ Curran, *Contemporary Problems*, 15.

⁵⁶ Curran, *Contemporary Problems*, 18.

its final fulfillment so that the new heaven and the new earth are one and the same...[then] there is not a strict dichotomy between Christian ethics and non-Christian ethics.” Theologically it is difficult to draw exact lines to distinguish Christian ethics from human ethics, when reality is viewed from a total Christian perspective. The world, as the historical experience and reflection of human beings, can no longer be adequately construed through the ahistorical and essentialist categories, meanings, and language of a natural law theory.⁵⁷

The dynamic basis of ethical judgment is experience. Something changes and we become aware of something that makes us ask what is happening, why am I concerned, what could happen, what ought I do?⁵⁸ The insights, questions, motives, and goals of non-Christians can truly provide access to understanding the moral problem, discovering truth, and taking responsible action. Christian ethics, as a formal, systematic reflection on morality begins only *logically* with “the light of the Gospel message and the meaning of the new life received in Christ Jesus.”⁵⁹ Faith provides only the horizon or foundational way a Christian looks at reality. In order to discern how God offers God’s love to all human beings, however, and understand Christian moral decision making, moral theology must learn from generic human experience in the light of Christian faith. The basis for (condition of the possibility of) a “Christian morality” is the human ability to make moral judgments and take moral responsibility. Human experience is the ontological basis for being able to speak of Christian morality, a transcendental morality, whose finality is the love of God. To bring the light of the Gospel and the validity of human experience together in discovering moral truth involves a methodological problem that is “common to every human science—the need to clearly differentiate the category of meaning as the specific data of any science involving human reality.”⁶⁰ Moral reality can only be described in terms of the human meaning that is inseparably connected to the data of human responsibility. For Christian ethics, Curran argues, this means identifying its own faith base and explaining how that intelligently shapes reality and morally construes human action. Ethics will

⁵⁷ Curran, *Contemporary Problems*, 17-19.

⁵⁸ See Kenneth R. Melchin, *Living with Other People: An Introduction to Christian Ethics Based on Bernard Lonergan* (Ottawa: Novalis, 1998), 17-33.

⁵⁹ Curran, *Dialogue*, 21.

⁶⁰ Curran, *Contemporary Problems*, 147.

thereby recognize that “human experience does not just correspond to the sphere of the natural.”⁶¹ Human experience, as meaning-filled reality, according to Lonergan, comes to be in an “intrinsic relation” to the intentional and transcendental structure of human knowing.⁶² For Curran what is explicitly religious in Christian faith is not extrinsic to “the human.” Since the meaning of human reality and responsibility is ultimately moral and religious, all human experience “can include at least implicitly what the Gospel contains by way of ethical conclusions and proximate attitudes, dispositions and values.”⁶³

As a natural law revisionist, Curran rejects the notion of natural law as a body of ethical truths, norms, and principles. He denies that the church’s teaching authority has any privileged role in discovering and interpreting moral truth. The basis of morality is the dynamic fact of an emergent reality and the inductive, historical process of coming to know reality in its moral and religious meaning. This complex insight sets Curran’s theological agenda as he makes his own the requirement that “moral theology or Christian ethics must now develop better hermeneutic tools for interpreting reality in the light of the Gospel and of human experience.”⁶⁴

Although Curran’s position is that ethics is essentially religious, he supports the autonomy of ethics from religious authority. The ethicist embarks on an essentially humanistic project—in solidarity with all men and women who must live up to what it means to be human. However, in approaching that task, the Christian ethicist brings a Christian personal identity and participation in a community of faith—of common meanings and values—that impact on how he or she interprets reality ethically and reaches decisions.

3. *The scholarly structure of ethics.* If there is no distinctive material content to Christian ethics, then moral theology is reflection on human behavior. For Curran, human behavior reflects and embodies a common human nature and single world history—both influenced and shaped by the five-fold Christian mysteries of salvation history—that precludes two distinct sets of ethical standards accessible through different epistemological processes. Because ethics is a human endeavor, Christian ethics, while bringing a

⁶¹ Curran, *Dialogue*, 21-2.

⁶² Curran refers to Bernard Lonergan’s paper entitled “Cognitional Structure,” Lonergan, *Collection*, 221-239.

⁶³ Curran, *Dialogue*, 22.

⁶⁴ Curran, *Dialogue*, 22.

distinctively faith based perspective to the task of being human, makes use of the same kinds of ethical methodologies that are available to any non-theological forms of ethics. Even the loftiest, faith inspired decisions must be subjected to a rigorous rational process that connects premises to conclusions within a clearly articulated paradigm that makes sense to people both inside and outside the church.

The Second Vatican Council, in its call for the renewal of moral theology, did not limit itself to or focus primarily on a revision of natural law, but expressed the desire to make scripture central to Christian moral reflection. When speaking of this connection between ethics and scripture, the Council clearly means the text or written tradition of revelation. It expects that the written word of God will form an integral part of moral theology and not just serve a preparatory role, as assigned to it by Curran.⁶⁵ These texts, moreover, are to form part of the process in which moral theology relates Christian action in the world to both the evangelical vocation and God's purposes as expressed in and interpreted from the written text. The scriptural text performs an active mediating function. As will be evident in the next few paragraphs, Curran sees the text as mediated by reason.⁶⁶

Curran prefaces his discussion of the relation of the Bible and moral theology by pointing out that there is no uniform way in which the Bible has been employed in the moral reasoning of the church. Especially since the Council of Trent (1545-1563), Catholic moral theology has been based exclusively on natural law, with scripture being used mainly as a source of proof texts.⁶⁷ Moral theological practice, Curran concludes, confirms that the Bible has never been regarded as the only or primary source of ethical

⁶⁵ "They should learn to seek the solution of human problems in the light of revelation, to apply its eternal truths to the changing conditions of human affairs, and to express them in language that the people of the modern world will understand...Special care should be given to the perfecting of moral theology. Its scientific presentation should draw more fully on the teaching of Holy Scripture and should throw light upon the exalted vocation of the faithful in Christ and their obligation to bring forth fruit in charity in the life of the world." *Optatum Totius*, n. 16, *Vatican II*, 720; "Sacred theology relies on the written Word of God, taken together with sacred Tradition...Therefore, the 'study of the sacred page' should be the very soul of sacred theology." *Dei Verbum*, n. 24, *Vatican II*, 764.

⁶⁶ Chapters 5 and 6 of this thesis analyze Curran's notion of mediation more extensively. Curran equates the meaning of mediation with the sacramental principle, whereby human actions and natural things, such as eating bread, become the means by which Christians share in the communion of God's kingdom. However, Curran leaves out the role of *epiklese* (the calling down of the Spirit) and Scripture (the telling of the story), both of which are constitutive of sacrament. Just as scripture is not simply mediated by the sacrament, but mediates as well, so in moral theology scripture is both mediating and mediated.

⁶⁷Curran, *Dialogue*, 26-27.

knowledge and truth in Roman Catholic ethics. Biblical teachings have to be understood in continuity with human ethical experience.⁶⁸

The relevance of the Bible to Catholic moral theology is summarized by Curran in three points: scripture points out the essentially religious nature and dialogical structure of the moral life; its moral prescriptions and teachings must be understood historically; there is no such entity as “biblical ethics.” The Bible provides the moral theologian with an alternate way of thinking about moral behavior to that which is found in the manuals. Morality should not be considered as a relationship to natural law, but as a relationship to God, a religious ethics of “response to the activity and call of God” in human experience.⁶⁹ Neither is morality based on a goal or *telos* toward which one is striving. It is a response here and now to the presence of God “in the midst of the multiple relationships in which [one] finds himself.”⁷⁰ Even the Ten Commandments are better understood as “expressions of personal commitment and [covenant] relationship with God” than as deontological norms or rules.⁷¹ The Bible, Curran states, describes morality as structured dialogically. Ethical reflection, in order to do justice to this structure, needs to follow a method that is also dialogical.

Curran also maintains that since biblical scholarship has pointed out the cultural and historical limitations of the biblical word, “one cannot without further refinement take biblical norms and automatically see them as always obliging in different contexts of our historical lives.”⁷² The historicity of biblical moral teachings is affected, as well, by theological interpretations. The proper understanding of eschatology, for example, may lessen the absolute character of ethical demands such as those in the Sermon on the Mount—a process that is already evident in the exceptions to the divorce prohibition that appear within the New Testament.⁷³ The universality of the call to holiness in the New Testament suggests that the moral standards set therein are realized within a life-long process of conversion and that ethical

⁶⁸ Curran, *Dialogue*, 25-26.

⁶⁹ Curran, *Dialogue*, 28.

⁷⁰ Curran, *Dialogue*, 28.

⁷¹ Curran, *Dialogue*, 30-31.

⁷² Curran, *Dialogue*, 32.

⁷³ Curran, *Dialogue*, 41.

reflection will take into consideration “the realities of growth and development in the moral life.”⁷⁴ That claim, according to Curran, also supports “a theoretical platform for a universalism in thought and action.” The one history and the “same human nature,” shared by all men and women, unite Christian revelation (as an explicit orientation toward moral responsibility) with the exigences of human growth (as the implicit orientation of humanity toward God).⁷⁵

Curran views the construction of a biblical ethics as something “impossible of achievement.”⁷⁶ The problems inherent in systemization and selection, two processes that are inevitable in construing the moral message of scriptures in a unitary manner, reflect an often unacknowledged ethical methodology and theological presuppositions, the result of which could be “that the full biblical message is not properly understood.”⁷⁷ The relation of Christian ethics to the Bible is viewed within what has already been pointed out as Curran’s understanding of the formal claims of natural law theory: the moral teachings of the Bible are to be taken as one source, but not necessarily the only or preferred source, of moral knowledge and wisdom for a Christian. Sacred scripture shapes Christian understandings of moral meaning or of what being human entails. In this sense, Curran can be interpreted as holding that scripture makes transparent what is transpiring in an otherwise confusing and complex human occurrence. However, Curran raises a theoretical objection to the ethicist’s ability to grasp the meaning of the sacred text and to use it to interpret the moral situation. He calls this the hermeneutic problem. His methodological distance from scripture refers very clearly to the scholarly impropriety of applying any particular scriptural narrative or passage as an “answer” to what the Christian must do in a particular situation today.

This position, however, contains a methodological anomaly. On the one hand, it views the moral interpretation of parts of scripture and/or the construction of a “biblical ethics” as a projection of the ethical bias of the interpreter, while on the other hand, he accepts his own understanding of the biblical dimensions of a full Christian perspective and the dialogical-relational character of morality as legitimate. The “hermeneutical problem” should also apply to Curran’s own limited use of scripture.

⁷⁴ Curran, *Dialogue*, 33.

⁷⁵ Curran, *Dialogue*, 9.

⁷⁶ Curran, *Dialogue*, 42.

⁷⁷ Curran, *Dialogue*, 47.

Curran's point is not really about the meanings of scripture. In dealing with ethical content from the Bible, the ethicist's methodology must be rational, in the sense that its arguments should be compatible with "any and all forms of ethics."⁷⁸ The movement from the Bible to decision making requires an intelligible basis and rational criteria that explain just "how precisely the Bible functions...for normatively directing Christian ethics today."⁷⁹

Whatever degree of normative obligation one might attribute to the Bible, it remains necessary to be able to make use of and dialogue with other sources of ethical wisdom that are available through human wisdom and reason. Therefore, moral theology requires a methodology that is continuous with the human ethical enterprise. Curran argues that the kinds of rational criteria and standards required for the credibility of any non-religious ethical approach will also be required of an approach that intends to relate the Bible to the process of attaining moral knowledge and wisdom today. The ethicist has a responsibility "to establish on the grounds of ethical thinking and Christian understanding...the best type of theory to employ."⁸⁰

Curran's early writings on natural law, humanism, Christian ethics and biblical morality reveal the standards and rational criteria he identifies as essential to academic and intellectual credibility. Curran has not worked out the details of such a theory at this time, but cautions against any oversimplification in approach that fails "to consider all the elements that should enter into the ethical consideration."⁸¹ He points out six areas to be considered in developing a Christian moral methodology: 1) stance, 2) model, 3) values, goals, ideals, 4) dispositions and attitudes of the subject, 5) norms, and 6) the process of moral decision-making. When Curran finally constructs his method, these six will be combined into four, as will be shown later.

Although the revealed scriptures, both Old and New Testaments, form an integral part of Christian life today, Curran finds difficulty in integrating the scriptural text with the process of Christian ethics. The difficulties of interpretation, both within the text and in its application to today, mean that the narrative and historical aspects of scripture are not directly available to the Christian ethicist, but are transferred to moral

⁷⁸ Curran, *Dialogue*, 49

⁷⁹ Curran, *Dialogue*, 52.

⁸⁰ Curran, *Dialogue*, 52.

⁸¹ Curran, *Dialogue*, 54.

theology by means of doctrinal summaries of the content of faith. When this occurs, there is always the danger of separating the symbols and values of the faith from what P. Travis Kroeker calls “their experiential basis and invisible spiritual reference.” As doctrinal principles for the moral interpretation of human experience, the mysteries and symbols that came to be through the experiences recounted in the Bible, then, have a tendency “to lead to contradiction and obfuscation.”⁸² As William Spohn states: “The fact remains that Christianity is a historical religion. It asserts that God’s self-disclosure occurs in human history and that certain revelatory events (exodus, exile, cross and resurrection, and so on) determine how subsequent generations are called to respond to God.”⁸³ Spohn goes on to say that the Gospels especially fill out the basic narrative structure of Christian revelation, which is “indispensable for Christian discipleship. Their parables, stories, and teachings shape Christian imagination and dispositions to act in a way to conform to Jesus.”⁸⁴

The contemporary ability to recognize the presence and activity of God in history, as Curran intends, would seem to be intrinsically linked with the ability to understand and respond to scripture in a way that is more concrete than through doctrinal distillations of its message. If human experience is the subject of moral reflection in the present, an interpretation of the past, biblical experience ought to be able to function in some paradigmatic manner for making moral meaning today. In Curran’s approach, the historical concreteness of the scriptures gives way to doctrinal generalization. The failure to connect, in the developmental stage of his method, operative moral theological concepts, values, principles, symbols, and images with the human experience of the early church, impacts negatively on Curran’s ability to fully exploit the potential of the ethical stance and model that he chooses. Curran stops short of saying that rational ethical criteria and the requirements of method are the evaluative measure of biblical moral teachings. But one can hardly avoid asking—and Curran acknowledges this—“is there any great difference

⁸² P. Travis Kroeker, *Christian Ethics and Political Economy in North America: A Critical Analysis* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1995), 125.

⁸³ William C. Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise: Jesus and Ethics* (New York: Continuum, 2000), 20.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 23.

in content between Christian ethics, with revelation and the Scripture as the reason for its possible distinctive character, and other human ethics?”⁸⁵

In terms of its origin, then, Curran holds that the morality found in the Bible is not the result of “any special revelation of content from God,”⁸⁶ but of moral and religious reflection on human experience-- a process common to Christians, Jews, and other religions. For Curran, the difference between Christian and non-Christian ethics (on both categorical and intentional levels) “can at times be only the difference between explicit and implicit,” and that “the redemptive power and knowledge that the Christian has in the Gospel are also available somehow or other to all men.”⁸⁷

There remains, of course, the hermeneutical challenge that comes from the multiple demands of committing to a position that sees morality as essentially religious, views human experience in the light of the Gospel, and wants to follow a methodology that—in terms of human knowledge—can be in continuity with other approaches to human ethics, i.e. based on reason. Human experience, as mediated by Christian meaning (a meaning that can be attained anonymously and implicitly by non-Christians) and responded to in conscience, becomes the middle term, as it were, between the morality of God’s reign in the world and human life lived in positive relationship to God’s active reign. In approaching the task of effectively unpacking that “middle term,” Curran makes a choice to adopt a method that is centered on the human person. Curran’s moral theology is essentially a religious anthropology. The role of Scripture is understood in terms of its impact on the person who decides and acts, coloring “the explicit self understanding of the Christian and the decision making process he employs.”⁸⁸ Scriptures provide the ethicist with a perspective and model for reflecting on “who the Christian is and what his attitudes, dispositions, goals, values, norms and decisions are.”⁸⁹ Whatever is found in Scripture regarding morality can be found “somehow or other” in the experience and reflection of all, insofar as a person is responding to God’s universal offer of salvation.

⁸⁵ Curran, *Dialogue*, 56.

⁸⁶ Curran, *Dialogue*, 59.

⁸⁷ Curran, *Dialogue*, 63.

⁸⁸ Curran, *Dialogue*, 64.

⁸⁹ Curran, *Dialogue*, 64.

Thus Curran's dialogue with scripture reinforces the foundational tenet of his approach: human experience, not nature or the physical structure of any action, is the subject of moral theology. Method will have to enable the theologian to dialogue with authentic moral experience anywhere, in any culture, and to find ways of opening Christian meaning to these diverse experiences and these experiences to Christian meaning.

B. Curran's moral theological method

Curran approaches "the question of method in moral theology with the presumption that errors and mistakes in method generally arise not so much from positive error as from the failure to consider all the aspects which deserve discussion."⁹⁰ Method must do justice to the demands of the complexity of experience as well as measure up to the strictest requirements of scientific inquiry. Curran emphasizes that in a revised natural law reality is understood as experience: historical, personal, and transcendental. This requires a shift from an *a priori*, deductive approach to one that is empirical and inductive. However, he does not fully explain the meaning of these terms or detail their philosophical underpinnings. Even the meaning of "method" is left vague, being used interchangeably with "approach" to describe what the ethicist does that allows human experience to become a theological source for arriving at conclusions in Christian religious ethics. Richard Grecco understands Curran this way when he writes that method describes "the [ethicist's] process of...thinking."⁹¹

Curran indicates that he follows both Karl Rahner and Bernard Lonergan in developing his moral theological method.⁹² Rahner takes natural law to mean nature, particularly human nature, in relation to its fulfillment in God and God's absolute self-communication in time and history.⁹³ To know natural law involves knowing oneself and human existence as unlimited openness to God, the fundamental ground and absolute future of human existence--an openness that is apprehended and made actual in the concreteness

⁹⁰ Charles E. Curran, *Directions in Fundamental Moral Theology* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985), 5.

⁹¹ Grecco, *A Theology of Compromise*, introduction.

⁹² Curran, *Contemporary Problems*, 134-5.

⁹³ Karl Rahner, "Theologie und Anthropologie," *Schriften zur Theologie*, Bd. VIII (Einsiedeln: Benziger Verlag, 1967), 45-65.

of history. Natural law is historical knowledge of nature, not only in its physical and physiological structure, but its transcendental and religious structure.⁹⁴ Rahner grounds this theory of natural law in the conditions in the subject that make understanding nature and its transcendental structure possible.⁹⁵

Lonergan understands nature as the not-yet-fully-known reality of who we are. It is an ideal or symbol for the answer that we seek when we inquire about human reality/meaning--a questioning that occurs within the structure of human knowledge. Human cognitive structure supplies a normative pattern of human knowing: experiencing, understanding, and judging.⁹⁶ This simple three-step structure is in fact a complex and dynamic process, driven by the person's innate and limitless desire to know. Its result is not only knowledge of the object known, but self-knowledge or self-appropriation. Understanding exists "only in the empirical, intellectual, and rational consciousness of the self-affirming subject."⁹⁷

Lonergan states that the pursuit of knowledge, the desire to move from ignorance to knowing, follows the heuristic of cognitional structure. Human beings come to know in a transcendental process that is the same in all instances of coming to know. The process tends toward self-transcendence, arising in the innate desire of the person to know absolutely--to know unconditioned being and unconditioned value. This is a self-correcting process, whose historical test is the attainment of the virtually unconditioned (there are no more relevant questions that need to be answered). Every inquiry involves a principle of insight that will operate invariantly, "opening upon all further developments of understanding," so long as the knowing subject is prepared to "thoroughly understand what it is to understand" and to appropriate "one's own rational self-consciousness."⁹⁸

⁹⁴ Karl Rahner, "Naturrecht," in *Lexikon fuer Theologie und Kirche*, Bd. 7, ed. Josef Hoefler and Karl Rahner (Freiburg: Herder Verlag, 1962), 827-8.

⁹⁵ Rahner, "Theologie und Anthropologie," 44.

⁹⁶ This was the structure that Lonergan outlined in *Insight*. Later he added deliberation-response to the pattern, extending his understanding of the good from what is intelligent to what is desirable. "In *Insight* the good was the intelligent and reasonable. In *Method* the good is a distinct notion. It is intended in questions for deliberation...It is known in judgments of value...It is brought about by deciding and living up to one's decisions." Bernard Lonergan, *A Second Collection*, ed. William F.J. Ryan and Bernard J. Tyrrell (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1974), 277.

⁹⁷ Bernard F. Lonergan, *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan*, vol. 3, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, 5th ed., ed. Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran (London: Longman, Green, and Co., 1957; Toronto: University of Toronto Press for Lonergan Research Institute of Regis College, 1992) 421.

⁹⁸ Lonergan, *Insight*, 22.

Lonergan sees ethics as a prolongation of transcendental knowing to the plane of action. To the three transcendental operations of knowing is added a fourth—responsibility—through which one makes a decision to act. Lonergan focuses on identifying and explaining human intentionality and the ground and future of human living (God and grace), which are discovered in the dynamic structure of knowing. Ethics refers to moral self-consciousness. It is a lived reality, which emerges in human judgments and actions that have the potential to advance or hold back one's process of self-transcendence. The purpose of method is to help the person move through this process, providing "a normative pattern of recurrent and related operations yielding cumulative and progressive results,"⁹⁹ or "a set of directives that serve to guide the process towards a result."¹⁰⁰ Ethical method facilitates the knower and actor becoming conscious of what he or she needs to do to be responsible.

Method is more than a format or formula. It must have both theological and philosophical credibility. Philosophically, method must produce its own warrants. The normative pattern of operations must be validated in the experience of human beings, judging and acting responsibly. Its normative character will be recognized in its ability to help people "discover in themselves ...the dynamic structure of their own cognitional and moral being."¹⁰¹ The philosophic foundation for ethical method "lies not in a set of verbal propositions named first principles, but in a particular, concrete, dynamic reality generating knowledge of particular, concrete, dynamic realities."¹⁰² What is normative, then, is that method should reflect and facilitate how living persons "discover in themselves ...the dynamic structure of their own cognitional and moral being."¹⁰³

Theologically, method is validated by its ability to determine the presence of moral and religious conversion in the positions that are reached. Lonergan attributes both a mediating and mediated phase to method. Method mediates religious reality when it interprets experience in the light of faith. It then proceeds to a mediated phase, which confronts the future in the creativity, freedom, and responsibility that

⁹⁹ Lonergan, *Method*, 4.

¹⁰⁰ Lonergan, *Insight*, 421.

¹⁰¹ Lonergan, *Method*, xii.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

brings human experience and religious mystery together.¹⁰⁴ Thus, method in moral theology needs to be so structured as to maintain the dialogue and tension between transcendent and contingent human experience, between religious and non-religious approaches to human problems.

For both Rahner and Lonergan transcendental, natural law method serves the purpose of discovering meaning from a Christian perspective that not only is adequate to the complexity and confusion of human experience, but is open to the discovery of similar meanings--albeit anonymously or implicitly--in dialogue with non-believers and non-Christians. The normative quality of such a Christian ethics will not be grounded in faith statements or biblical precepts, because its warrants must be accessible to reason. Christian ethics will seek its normativeness in the *a priori* conditions, common in every person, that account for "a normative pattern of recurrent and related operations" leading to moral insight into a particular situation and yielding greater moral understanding and responsibility.¹⁰⁵ The transcendental thought of Rahner and Lonergan provides Curran with the bridge that mediates universally human meanings and validates the moral insights of both faith and human experience. The coherence (or lack of it) between how people make authentic moral judgments and the process of ethical reasoning followed by the ethicist will be the test of any ethical method.

Curran proposes a method modeled on the movement of "conversion as the transformation of the subject."¹⁰⁶ To provide a systematic, reflective framework for authentic moral choice and action, he orients method primarily toward the person, as individual. The movement of method has, in Grecco's opinion, a double purpose: 1) to give meaning to human situations and thus help clarify what is at stake ethically and 2) to operate functionally, in order to move the process of ethical reflection forward to responsible

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., xi, 144-45.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 6-13. Thus, for Lonergan, method and content are not separate, although he is primarily concerned with the question of method. In the preface of the same book Lonergan writes: "Let me beg them [my critics] not to be scandalized because I quote scripture, the ecumenical Councils, papal encyclicals, other theologians so rarely and sparingly. I am writing not theology but method in theology. I am concerned not with the objects that theologians expound but with the operations that theologians perform." This quote may help to explain Curran's approach. To get at what Curran is undertaking requires both recognition that Curran understands his project as dealing more with method than content and an acknowledgement that ethical content is substantively the same, regardless of whether it is described in biblical images or human categories.

¹⁰⁶ Curran, *Dialogue*, 220.

action.¹⁰⁷ Method structures moral reflection, so that it can open the human situation to its most comprehensive religious significance.

1. Stance. Stance describes the horizon that “forms the way in which the subject looks at reality and structures his own understanding of the world and reality.”¹⁰⁸ Stance supplies “the logically prior first question in ethics which is comprehensive enough to include all that should be included and yet gives some direction and guidance in terms of developing criteria.”¹⁰⁹ It is meant to insure that the ethical field of vision includes all that needs to be included. Christian faith understands reality as embodying five core religious mysteries: creation, sin, incarnation, redemption and resurrection destiny. As Grecco observes: “Curran begins thinking about moral theology as a believer. The thematic content of his Stance centers around doctrine.”¹¹⁰

Stance does not “rest merely on an *a priori* deduction or assumption,”¹¹¹ but accompanies and constitutes human experience. Life’s complexity, hope, and moral confusion are interpreted (or reinterpreted) by and receive meaning from the faith claims contained in the five mysteries, which mark out the intellectual horizon on which the Christian interprets what is happening. Moral theology is not only about human action, but also about the presence and activity of God in the world. Through stance Curran establishes “the range of [ethical] knowledge and interests” to include all that Christians believe.¹¹² The historicist worldview, in which Curran works, construes reality as dynamically unfolding in life and history. The use of Christian beliefs to construct a methodological stance allows moral theology to accept and respond to the historical, changing, relational aspects of human experience and God’s grace, as offering the best hope for finding moral meanings and behaviors that can be shared with and reflect the ethical

¹⁰⁷ Grecco, *A Theology of Compromise*. Grecco has produced a lengthy study of method in Curran’s ethics., in which he examines each stage of method under the aspects of meaning and function, with the intention of studying Curran’s theory of compromise. While I am indebted to several of Grecco’s insights, my own summary is aimed more at relating Curran’s methodological originality to his theological project. I am less interested in the rigorous application of meaning-function as an analytical tool, as Grecco masterfully uses it, than in showing how method reflects Curran’s revised construal of natural law..

¹⁰⁸ Curran, *New Perspectives*, 56.

¹⁰⁹ Curran, *New Perspectives*, 55.

¹¹⁰ Grecco, *A Theology of Compromise*, 27.

¹¹¹ Charles E. Curran, *Moral Theology: A Continuing Journey* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982), 38.

¹¹² Lonergan, *Method*, 235.

experience of non-Christians, as well. Curran argues that all five mysteries must be included in stance, in order to realistically and objectively discover the transcendent reality of God in any categorical experience.¹¹³

Creation affirms that the world is good. The human is the starting point for ethical reflection—in terms both of human reason and human experience. It is the basis for a common ground morality and ethical dialogue. A Christian, seeking to respond to God’s activity in the world, pays attention to the ethical values of others who do not share his or her faith, in order to not close any available opening to moral understanding. The mystery of creation makes dialogue not only possible, but “an absolutely necessary aspect of our existence as Christians.”¹¹⁴

The mystery of sin means that selfishness is not simply an external action of an individual but is a constitutive aspect of reality in which moral choices are made. Sin is “incarnational” and “sacramental”¹¹⁵—prolonged in time and space through structures, institutions, practices, attitudes, and behaviors. The inclusion of sin in the methodological stance impacts on how one understands moral ideals and the ways in which they can realistically be achieved.¹¹⁶ Sin not only signals the limits inherent in every moral situation, it helps identify the causes of disorder in our relationships with God, ourselves, and each other, along with the obstacles to be overcome both in moral action and ethical reflection on that action.

Incarnation, the proclamation “that God has united himself to humanity in the person of Jesus Christ gives a value and importance to all that is human and material in this world.”¹¹⁷ Incarnation serves a more dynamic function than creation, not only affirming the goodness of reality in face of sin, but reminding us of the responsibility and obligation to extend that goodness in historical reality and transform it by “making incarnate in...daily life the Christian Gospel.”¹¹⁸

¹¹³ Bernard Lonergan argues that the existence of God is the condition of the possibility for an ethical world, for progress in history, and preventing history from regressing into an ethical abyss. See Bernard Lonergan, *A Second Collection*, 85-86.

¹¹⁴ Curran, *New Perspectives*, 60.

¹¹⁵ Curran, *New Perspectives*, 224; Curran, *Themes*, 161.

¹¹⁶ Curran, *New Perspectives*, 75.

¹¹⁷ Curran, *New Perspectives*, 75.

¹¹⁸ Curran, *New Perspectives*, 76.

Curran combines the remaining mysteries--redemption and resurrection destiny-- to connect morality with its soteriological and eschatological dimensions. Redemption embodies a call to conversion, change and development. Eschatology is a warning that no state of affairs in this world can be or expected to be the fullness of life promised in Christ's victory over sin and death. Resurrection destiny denotes that what occurred in the resurrection of Jesus does not stop there. Resurrection functions as "destiny" when the Christian sees life as a prolonged pascal mystery, through which the church and the Christian (and implicitly all human beings) participate in the suffering, death, and resurrection of Christ. One suffers what must be borne for the sake of justice and the kingdom and moral social progress, knowing that what one strives for can never be fully realized in history.¹¹⁹

Stance is a way of viewing reality. It does not ground norms, but describes "the way the subject looks at reality and structures his own understanding of the world." Ethical perspective is not primarily about content or object, but is the "formal structuring of the way in which the individual views reality."¹²⁰ It is the formal structure, within which content (goals, virtues, and norms) can be adjudicated. Stance is normative in that it requires that Christian ethics acknowledge and account for the complex and conflictual character of human existence. It functions as a criterion of inclusion, insuring that no factor that bears on human action and responsibility is left out of consideration.

Traditional natural law is an example for Curran of a stance that is too narrow. Natural law theory ignores the realities of sin and eschatology (that is, the real social-temporal situated-ness of human experience) in its rational inferences. "The presence of sin," Curran explains, "means that at times one might not be able to do what would be done if there were no sin present."¹²¹ As a result one does not have all the choices that may be there theoretically.

2. *Model*. "The second logical step in the systematic reflection, which is moral theology, concerns the [ethical] model" or "how one understands the Christian life."¹²² It is a "way of conceptualizing ethics and

¹¹⁹ Curran, *New Perspectives*, 84; Grecco, *A Theology of Compromise*, 26.

¹²⁰ Curran, *New Perspectives*, 56.

¹²¹ Curran, *Dialogue*, 216; for a lengthier explanation of Curran's "theory of compromise" and how sin limits choices and forces a person to accept behavior that, in the absence of sin, would be considered immoral, see Grecco, *A Theology of Compromise*, 189-195

¹²² Curran, *A Continuing Journey*, 44.

the moral life.”¹²³ Model exercises a normative function, insofar as it sets “the perimeters within which the ethical life is discussed” and decisions are determined as morally acceptable or not.¹²⁴ Model thus functions to ensure that ethical reflection extends to every part of the moral situation: its personal, inter-personal, social, cosmic, and temporal dimensions. Theologically, model attempts to make ethical considerations coextensive with the reality of grace and conversion. In constructing his ethical model Curran chooses a relationality-responsibility understanding of morality, over the deontological and teleological views. He also employs religious images and symbols so that the Christian can see, in the “light of faith,” what is morally at stake.

Curran understands the moral and Christian life as historical and relational. Ethics begins with the human person who is, at any particular point in history, constituted through multiple relationships with others, with self, with God, and with the world. These relationships are dynamic, developmental, particular, and transcendent. Not duty or consequences, but creative fidelity to the kind of relationship that God offers to men and women in historical living is the characteristic of morality. Morality is essentially social or relational and temporal. From a Christian perspective it concerns what we can do now “to work for an eschatological future that must transcend the present.”¹²⁵ “The ultimate model of the ethical life therefore should be broad enough to consider all the more specific questions and topics that form part of ethics and moral theology”:¹²⁶ the attitudes, dispositions, values, and practices that contribute to loving relationships, as well as the structures and institutions that embody and stabilize them. The concreteness of living provides ethics, according to Curran, with the data for reflection that can lead to the recognition and realization of the creative and transcendent aspects of human living: freedom and responsibility. Curran’s model affirms that historical and changing aspects of human reality are essential to the process of establishing norms for particular decisions.¹²⁷ This relativizes the purely consequentialist/teleological

¹²³ Curran, *The Catholic Moral Tradition Today: A Synthesis* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1999), 60.

¹²⁴ Curran, *Directions*, 12.

¹²⁵ Curran, *New Perspectives*, 13.

¹²⁶ Curran, *Directions*, 189.

¹²⁷ Curran, *Directions*, 189.

models of morality and denies “any eternal, static, hierarchy of relational values,” as promoted by deontology.¹²⁸

Curran’s commitment to moral dialogue rests in the relational model of morality. At times, Curran refers to model as “dialogue set within a social matrix, including God, other, and self.”¹²⁹ He finds the essentials of the model he is seeking in H. Richard Niebuhr’s ethics of responsibility. Morality is about the fittingness or quality of the response made to an action upon us in accord with our interpretation of what is happening. We are accountable for what we do in terms both of anticipation of responses to our response and of our membership in a continuing society.¹³⁰ However, Curran claims an ontological basis for relationality that he does not find in Niebuhr’s “man-the-answerer, man engaged in dialogue, man acting in response to action upon him.”¹³¹ Niebuhr’s model, although it construes morality and Christian life as a “response to action upon us with the question in mind, ‘To whom or what am I responsible and in what community of interaction am I myself?’”¹³² and “stresses the social character of selfhood,”¹³³ lacks the ontological basis provided by the transcendental notion of covenant-community. As a constant, objective point of reference, the redemptive community functions also as a paradigm for “overcoming the forces of sin and death in one’s life and one’s world.”¹³⁴ Thus, Curran implies the requirement that the dialogue, in which the relational character of human living can be adequately discovered and appropriated, must pivot between religious symbols and human concrete experience. There is further implied by this “ontological basis” that Christian ethics construe its religious terms in human terms (that do not require Christian faith to understand) and human experience in religious terms (that make faith claims intelligible to the believer).

In accepting a relation-response model of ethics Curran chooses a model that can unpack the details of the historical-social matrix of human living and responsibility. The relational model looks for the binding norm of Christian ethics in the here and now. “The Christian then has the responsibility to make the

¹²⁸ Curran, *New Perspectives*, 16.

¹²⁹ Grecco, *A Theology of Compromise*, 64; see Curran, *Dissent*, 166.

¹³⁰ See H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self: An Essay In Christian Moral Philosophy*, paperback edition (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1978), 47-68.

¹³¹ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 56.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 68.

¹³³ Malloy, “The Ethics of Responsibility,” 24.

¹³⁴ Curran, *Directions*, 116.

kingdom more present and to overcome the evils of social, economic, political, and sexual oppression which too often continue to imprison many human beings.”¹³⁵ Curran understands moral action as taking place within a historical-social matrix, in which meaning and value are discovered through the cognitional and responsible movement of conscience.

Besides meeting the exigences of historical consciousness, the relationality-responsibility model accords more with the biblical ethical model than the other two models. Curran considers covenant, not law, to be the primary ethical category in the Old Testament. Morality is about recognizing and responding to God’s gift in the events of history. The New Testament joins the love of God and love of neighbor as defining images of true morality. Sin, on the other hand, is described as breaking or damaging the relationship between persons and God, themselves, each other, and creation itself. Employing the symbols of trinity, grace, covenant, and community--key notions that express human sharing in the divine life--theology conceptualizes the moral life as relational and interprets the moral life as relational.¹³⁶ For Curran, a transcendental methodology is needed to show how the human reality present in relationality and responsibility mediates the historical, contingent, and always-incomplete experience of God, because “this awareness does not ordinarily emerge into explicit consciousness.”¹³⁷

The function of model, then, is to help expose and clarify the values that are emerging in any situation. But Curran strongly emphasizes that the methodological level of model is distinct from that of decision-making. Model does not determine “moral norms or the criterion of concrete obligations” for specific actions nor does it perform the reasoning process for concrete decision making, through which some particular value or values become obliging in determining the choice and action one will follow.¹³⁸ The criterion operative in the relational model is that “self-transcendence which...reaches its fulfillment

¹³⁵ Curran, *Directions*, 230.

¹³⁶ Curran, *Directions*, 12-13, 229; see Grecco, *A Theology of Compromise*, 72.

¹³⁷ Curran, *Directions*, 239.

¹³⁸ For Curran, decision-making may follow any credible, ethically generic approach, which is open to religious reality. “On the level of the formulation of norms and the criteria for concrete decision-making” Curran opts for the “position described...as mixed consequentialism,”¹³⁸ in which not only is the goal to be achieved of importance, but also the transformation of the person. By emphasizing the growth of the person (rather than focus on the action alone or its consequences), Curran indicates that he is reflecting “a Christian bias in favor of those who do not accomplish or who are not successful—the poor, weak, and the outcasts.” Curran, *Directions*, 189-90.

when the subject exists in a loving relationship with God, neighbor, the world, and self.”¹³⁹ In a relation-response model, goals and rules are not irrelevant to ethics, but they must be subjected to a rational, historical-relational critique, which relativizes any claims of teleological and deontological approaches to absolutism or ultimate finality.¹⁴⁰

Although Curran’s model seems to have a mostly formal function—affirming the need to proceed to normative moral conclusions only by way of historically conscious inductive reasoning—each decision puts together elements of the Christian life in a unique and original manner. The creativity of the response is guided by fidelity to the values and principles that make up the Christian moral tradition and self-consciousness (perspective). “In general, freedom [to be creative] stresses the discontinuity aspect in life, whereas fidelity expresses the aspect of fidelity.” Thus, model underscores the importance of the historical uniqueness, the *kairos* of moral discernment —“the opportune moment which comes and will never come again.” Morality is about joining human attitudes, dispositions, motives, values, and actions with the “coming of God...[who] is continuing to be present to us in history and in our lives.”¹⁴¹ This, in turn, implies and requires that God’s presence and action can and ought be discerned and responded to in the signs of the time.

Grecco criticizes Curran for offering “no direct explanation of how model functions normatively.”¹⁴² In his study of Curran’s method, Grecco notes that in discussions of substantive ethical questions, Curran often mixes ethical models to an extent that “seems arbitrary” and “makes relationality pale.” When Curran introduces non-relational considerations into ethical reflection, one would expect him to provide the criteria for their use in terms of his relational model—something Grecco finds both missing and unexplained in Curran’s theory of compromise.¹⁴³ The relational model does not function clearly in terms of the theological content that Curran claims prevents ethics from falling into relativism. Instead, it

¹³⁹ Curran, *Directions*, 23.

¹⁴⁰ Curran, *Directions*, 12.

¹⁴¹ Curran, *Directions*, 79.

¹⁴² Grecco, *A Theology of Compromise*, 76.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 93.

serves a more formal task, along with stance, emphasizing the importance of having a “methodology which tends to be concrete, a posteriori and inductive.”¹⁴⁴

As noted above, Curran describes the moral response within this model as creative fidelity. Fidelity indicates the continuity between the contingent moral decision and the enduring reality that is promised and symbolized by the images of faith. However, a mediating theology, such as Curran’s, needs to be concerned not only with the transcendental dimensions of contingent action, but with the symbols and images in which this self-transcendence is identified and celebrated in Christian faith. Unless Curran is prepared to give model a concreteness through which it becomes recognizable within the faith community, which shares “a common field of experience...common and complementary ways of understanding...common judgments...values, goals, policies,”¹⁴⁵ then it will remain formal and abstract. These shared meanings name what is happening and are needed to prevent misunderstanding and self-delusion in decisions about whether something is in accord with the kingdom of God, is overcoming the broken and damaged relations caused by sin, and is truly mediating grace in our world. The hermeneutic task that is implied by a relational-response model that proposes to discern and respond to the work of God in the world is not complete until the “fully human” and implicitly Christian option can be reconnected with the symbols of faith that point to the ontological basis for the moral theological theory itself.

Model also seems to presuppose too much. It assumes, for example, the meaning of “the fully human” or “a proper understanding of our multiple relations with God, neighbor, self, and the world.”¹⁴⁶ Without content, these criteria become generalizations and beg the question of how they can be validated in concrete decisions, for every act of responsibility is an experiment in meaning, a leap of creative fidelity. Even when Curran construes the fulfillment of human striving eschatologically, he leaves open how the “present can be transformed somewhat even now...[by] the power of God.”¹⁴⁷ Without a more historically relevant eschatology, the historical incompleteness of covenant, community, and kingdom of God leads to a crisis, rather than clarification, of meaning-- what Geertz describes as “bafflement, suffering, and a sense of

¹⁴⁴ Curran, “How My Mind Has Changed, 1960-75,” *Horizons* 2 (Fall 1975): 197.

¹⁴⁵ Lonergan, *Method*, 356-57.

¹⁴⁶ Curran, *Directions*, 230.

¹⁴⁷ Curran, *Directions*, 190.

intractable ethical paradox.”¹⁴⁸ If the historical character of the *eschaton* is deleted, these symbols become merely formal paradigms. By de-historicizing the *eschaton*, Curran “seems to abandon his principles of complexity and tension in ethics.”¹⁴⁹

As a purely formal methodological element, model is simply an extension of stance and serves primarily to legitimate a framework for the revision of natural law theory along historicist lines.¹⁵⁰ Curran’s description of model as that “in view of which one understands the Christian life,” or that which “determines our understanding of basic moral considerations but also results in different solutions to concrete questions,”¹⁵¹ remains abstract. While Curran acknowledges, “this approach obviously needs much further development,”¹⁵² it is not clear here how model is related to substantive moral decisions.

3. *Person*. How one understands the human person is a significant ethical consideration for developing a methodology. Curran derives much of his understanding of human freedom and cognition from the transcendental theories of Lonergan and Rahner. Both regard the person as a freely acting agent and a self-creating, self-transcending subject, who through his or her actions, “develops and constitutes [his/her-] self as a moral subject.”¹⁵³ The person, as moral subject and agent, overshadows essential human nature as the determinant factor in decision-making, contributing to a revision of natural law along the lines described by Bernard Haering:

In ethics, natural law means the very nature of man in his concrete historical reality, insofar as he has the capacity to understand himself, his calling or vocation, and the meaning of his person and his relationship to God, to fellow men, and the created universe.¹⁵⁴

In the personalist understanding of human nature, the source of moral wisdom shifts from nature in the abstract to nature as known in human experience and shared reflection.

¹⁴⁸ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 100.

¹⁴⁹ See Grecco, *A Theology of Compromise*, 92-93. Here Grecco argues that Curran’s eschatology is simplistic and reflects a “picture book view” of this world and the next. “Instead of referring to ‘heaven’ in terms of ‘relationships’ he seems to be implying a ‘place’ of discontinuity.” By reducing “eschatology to considerations of discontinuity/continuity of heaven and earth [Curran seems to] imply rather than resolve the dualistic tendency” that, in the end, settles on discontinuity as the operative factor.

¹⁵⁰ Grecco, *Theology of Compromise*, 94.

¹⁵¹ Curran, *Continuing Journey*, 44.

¹⁵² Curran, *Directions*, 191.

¹⁵³ Curran, *Directions*, 15.

¹⁵⁴ Bernard Haering, *Morality Is For Persons* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971), 150.

Morally good action describes a process of self-transcendence, an orientation to the other, and building relationships that define human existence in a manner that is reflective of and responsive to the gracious gift of God in the world.¹⁵⁵ Immoral action refers to the process of selfishness, of closing in on oneself, and seeking primarily to satisfy oneself, even at the cost of others. In most moral situations there is ambiguity owing to the complexity of human experience and the countless and sometimes conflicting claims of relationships. An understanding of human action, from the viewpoint of the subject, who participates in reality through constructing its meaning and creatively giving it shape, sets the stage for the discussion of conscience and the grounding of norms that occurs in the final step of Curran's method.

A transcendental anthropology, which sees the person more as a work in progress than as a finished product, does not bring definitive answers to the reflection on the morality of particular choices and actions. In this understanding of person, intentionality stretches "the person...forth toward the [unrestricted] intelligible, the unconditioned, and the good of value."¹⁵⁶ However, the indeterminateness of intentionality as unrestricted openness results in a situation where it becomes "difficult to tell if one has broken [or strengthened] the multiple relationship of love."¹⁵⁷ In other words, a transcendental anthropology does not provide certain, extrinsic criteria for establishing the morality of any particular action, so much as make the ethicist aware of the process that is normative for coming to know what relationships are authentically human and effectively move the person to authentic relationship with God's presence and action in contingent events. Echoing Lonergan, Curran identifies this fundamental ethical insight as the *call* to continuous moral human conversion.¹⁵⁸

The inclusion of person in method is essential to how one determines the human good or, in Curran's language, the "fully human." More persuasively perhaps than any other part of his method, "person" indicates the importance of the "truly" human (both as an individual and social phenomenon) as

¹⁵⁵ Curran understands such God-experience as implicit in all human knowing and acting. God is not known as a thing among other things, but in the structure of human experience. "In all conscious acts the human being has an indistinct awareness of God as transcendent horizon but this awareness does not ordinarily emerge into explicit consciousness. Just as the individual is conscious to oneself as subject, so God as transcendent horizon but not as an object is present to consciousness." Curran, *Themes*, 215..

¹⁵⁶ Curran, *Directions*, 241.

¹⁵⁷ Curran, *Themes*, 155.

¹⁵⁸ See Curran, "Dialogue with Bernard Lonergan: The Concept of Conversion," *Dialogue*, 245-53.

Curran's central experiential criterion of morality. The dialogue required to reach some determination of what this means in time and relationship is at the core of Curran's ecumenical ethics of dialogue.

Curran uses the religious symbol of pascal mystery to interpret the import of authentic growth, self-transcendence, the truly human on ethical judgment, or "the new life we share in Jesus."¹⁵⁹ He also uses the symbols of discipleship and building the kingdom of God to mediate between general moral experience and Christian conscience. The Christian is explicitly called to work at eliminating sin in his or her person and in the world, yet will never experience unambiguous success in responding to the call. The call to build up the kingdom is a source of the urgency and obligatory aspect of morality, yet human transformation is neither continuous nor self-evident progress. In these circumstances a Christian is guided by the hope that God will in the end overcome sin. In the present this involves dying to oneself and hoping in God. The pascal mystery is the paradigm for this process and the basis of hope both in God's promise and the meaningfulness of the world.

Although "the true personal meaning of a particular act very often can never be truly known,"¹⁶⁰ attaining that kind of knowledge is assisted by the Christian virtue tradition. The relationships that a person creates through the process of dying and rising are characterized by values, such as faith, hope, love (in regard to God), love and justice (in regard to neighbor), and beliefs, such as the common destiny of the goods of creation (in relation to the world and society). Curran even argues for expanding the list to include, for example, freedom, fidelity, and openness, because they are necessary to discern what God is doing and to recognize the *kairos* (the not to be repeated opportunity to act in a self-transcendent, other oriented manner). "Openness, receptivity, and vigilance then must characterize the Christian who tries to live out the gift-response rhythm of the relationship of the believer to God as revealed through Jesus in the Spirit."¹⁶¹

Like the preceding steps in Curran's method, "person" does not prescribe concrete moral norms, but provides a paradigm of moral living and interprets morality as a "rhythm of growth...a rhythm of dying and rising." Moral content emerges as the concretization of the "drive of the subject toward authentic self-

¹⁵⁹ Curran, *Ongoing Revision*, 56.

¹⁶⁰ Curran, *Directions*, 107.

¹⁶¹ Curran, *Directions*, 79.

transcendence.”¹⁶² The ultimate, normative content of the moral life is “complete union of love with God, neighbor, world, and self—in other words, the fullest and deepest relationships possible.”¹⁶³ The Christian symbol of pascal mystery emphasizes the freedom of the person’s self-giving response to the gift of God in resurrection. Possible courses of action are not predetermined by absolute norms. They emerge from the person’s practical knowledge of what—in the flux of progress and decline—entails the next act of self-transcendence.¹⁶⁴ Curran interprets the back and forth movement of human experience between moral ambiguity and conviction, the pivoting between dying and rising, sin and redemption in a way that Curran gives “unity and logical coherence to these dimensions.”¹⁶⁵ The death-resurrection puts into perspective the frustrations and limitations of the moral life, the difficulty and slowness of growth and progress, and the need to constantly start over.

Moral change, in accord with Curran’s method, is expressed in transformed “relationship with others – fellow believers in the community, friends, enemies, and the poor.”¹⁶⁶ It is a self-transcending process expressed in actions that can be described as virtues and represent changes in the person that can be termed virtuous.¹⁶⁷ “There is truly no growth or development without implying the concept of obligation, for continual conversion remains both a gift and a demand for the Christian.”¹⁶⁸ With the pascal mystery as

¹⁶² Curran, *Directions*, 83. See also 15-16. It should be pointed out that Curran does not see the Pascal Mystery as devoid of content, but assumes that content emerges as appropriate responses to the social-historical situation of the person. Recognition of the content, of what is an appropriate moral response, is guided for the Christian by the theological and moral virtues and the marks of discipleship found in the New Testament. At the same time, Curran holds that there is nothing distinctively Christian about the actions, virtues, attitudes and dispositions that form the material content of morality. At the time, it should be pointed out that Curran criticizes L. Kohlberg’s stages of moral growth precisely because they concentrate too much on the formal aspect of moral development and do “not give enough importance to content.”

¹⁶³ Curran, *Directions*, 84.

¹⁶⁴ See Kenneth Melchin, *History, Ethics, and Emergent Probability: Ethics, Society, and History in the Work of Bernard Lonergan* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1987), 144-157, for a longer discussion of freedom and moral responsibility, understood within the intellectual thought of Bernard Lonergan. Melchin’s clarifications are relevant here, because of Curran’s reliance on Lonergan for an understanding of conscience.

¹⁶⁵ Grecco, *A Theology of Compromise*, 119; the whole first part of chapter III (112-19) in Grecco’s study deals with the meaning of the paradigm of the pascal mystery.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 75.

¹⁶⁷ Curran looks to the Christian tradition to provide the ethicist with in a catalogue of “different attitudes and dispositions that should be present in the Christian person and direct the way that person acts.” See Grecco, *A Theology of Compromise*, 76.

¹⁶⁸ Curran, *Contemporary Problems*, 255.

paradigm and the virtues of discipleship as objectifications of the social and relational obligation of moral living, moral norms are viewed as grounded in the capacity of human beings to grow and change.

Obligation is also extrinsic (a state of affairs or relationship that can be observed, communicated, and judged by others): the “mutual disclosure of the meaning of person” that emerges in relationship. In other words, moral conclusions must be accountable and warrants for them subject to dialogue. Curran’s use of the pascal mystery as revelatory of both the obligation and the promise of human being, unlike purely extrinsic norms, requires an even more strenuous and theologically normative dialogue: questioning and inquiry, developing positions and counterpositions, making critical judgments and responsible choices.

4. *Norms and decision-making.* Consideration of “concrete decision making and the morality of particular actions”¹⁶⁹ completes the methodological task. Ethical norms are grounded on what is experientially known and valued as good for the person, inextricably related to the total reality of self, others, society, nature, and God. Curran stands in the tradition that holds that “the ultimate moral decision rests with the properly formed conscience of the individual,”¹⁷⁰ Curran holds that norms are grounded in the existential and concrete process of conscience. In a word, “the criterion of value judgments is not the value or reality out there; rather, it is the satisfaction of the moral subject, as a self-transcending thrust toward value.”¹⁷¹

This is an ideal notion of conscience and, in reality, decision-making can and does fall short.

Curran briefly notes the dangers and difficulties of biased conscience formation and the inauthenticity that results, but is disposed to take these in stride.

As a result of our finitude we are limited; we see only a partial aspect of reality; we cannot achieve all possible goods or values. Human sinfulness, on the other hand, stems not from creation itself but from the actions of ourselves or others and can be seen in the sinfulness both of the individual and the society in which we live.¹⁷²

Because of human limitation, not every decision will be an authentic act of self-transcendence.

The criteria of conscience (something is known as worthwhile by the subject, good for the total human society, and understood in terms of relational criteria) may not be fully realized: the relational criteria may be misconstrued, critical consciousness may be underdeveloped, or practical judgment may be distorted by

¹⁶⁹ Curran, *Directions*, 18.

¹⁷⁰ Curran, *Ongoing Revision*, 64.

¹⁷¹ Curran, *Directions*, 242.

¹⁷² Curran, *Directions*, 245.

bias. The burden of the fourth step, consequently, would have to be to “justify why certain acts are responsible and authentic.”¹⁷³ Curran first responds with an appeal to purely formal constructs, according to which the cognitive process is so structured as to lead to self-transcendence, so that the person arrives at “peace and joy in the judgment of conscience as virtually unconditioned.”¹⁷⁴ Objectivity of knowledge and action is grounded not in the separation of object and subject (in which a good conscience agrees with the truth out there), but in the intentional operations of human cognitive structure, so that authentic self-transcendence “is synonymous with objectivity.”¹⁷⁵

Both knowledge and reality (as mediated by meaning) are emergent and historical events. Norms and values, while providing some direction for moral reflection, do not in this approach have a prior obliging force. No situation is simply an ideal type to which a norm can be directly applied. Curran argues that it is only in the active process of conscience, of reflection and response, that norms are grounded. “The real world...is mediated by meaning and is not the world of immediate experience...[but] is known by the cognitional process of experiencing, understanding, and judging, which is based on the thrust of cognitional self-transcendence.”¹⁷⁶ Thus, norms cannot arise independently, in the judging and acting individual, who is engaged in the process of realizing, at least partially and provisionally, his or her own value, relatedness, and self.

Curran views conscience within a model of relationality-responsibility, so “that the individual judges and decides in dialogue with other individuals and as members of various communities in which one lives.”¹⁷⁷ Norms, grasped within a relational consciousness, protect and promote Christian and human values by locating them within a concern for the good of all who are related in bonds of society.¹⁷⁸ Individuals judge and decide “in dialogue with other individuals and as members of various communities in which one lives.”¹⁷⁹ The grounding of norms assumes a multiplicity of relations and a genuineness of

¹⁷³ Grecco, *A Theology of Compromise*, 171.

¹⁷⁴ Curran, *Directions*, 24; see Lonergan, *Method*, 76, for a fuller discussion of the virtually unconditioned.

¹⁷⁵ Curran, *Directions*, 245; 22-23.

¹⁷⁶ Curran, *Directions*, 245.

¹⁷⁷ Curran, *Directions*, 248.

¹⁷⁸ Curran, *Directions*, 22.

¹⁷⁹ Curran, *Directions*, 248.

dialogue, rather than a solipsistic subjectivism or arbitrary self-interest. Despite the dialogical structure of decision, “the ultimate criterion of truth of conscience...is the self-transcendence of the human subject striving for authentic development.”¹⁸⁰

Curran acknowledges the difficulty of achieving subjective authenticity and of the ease with which evil is justified in the name of conscience, “that a decisive act may be authenticating of one’s person but be irresponsible.”¹⁸¹ He admits, moreover, that this is “the dilemma of conscience...[which commands] that the individual must act in accord with personal conscience, but conscience might be wrong.”¹⁸² This danger, however, does not compel the ethicist to look elsewhere for the grounding of moral norms.

At first glance, Curran’s argument reads like a tautology: if a conscience is authentic it is an authentic conscience. One is accountable to oneself. Although Curran acknowledges that meaning emerges in dialogue within the believing community or among those who anonymously, at least, affirm their selfhood in relation to the absolute mystery of life, he holds that the process of conscience grounds ethical thinking, Christian understanding, and guides ethical choice. The other question, that of dialogue (along with the difficulty of achieving the open, self-correcting, and self-transcending qualities that critical dialogue requires), is left aside by an appeal to “the mature moral subject [who] will be aware of these possible pitfalls and struggle against them.”¹⁸³ Such an assumption also seems to ignore faith as constitutive of Christian conscience, a way of knowing by which an individual accepts the wisdom of the believing community in the face of contrary personal insights. To make the cognitive process of conscience the ultimate norm in a process that supposedly embodies religious self-transcendence “appears subtly gnostic.”¹⁸⁴ The maxim that there is no contradiction between faith and reason gets collapsed into a claim that faith and reason are interchangeable.

What is absent in Curran’s discussion of conscience is an adequate account of how the conscientious process (attention, reasoning, reflection, and responsibility) works through and integrates the self-transcendence of the subject with the external act. If the physical structure of the external act is no

¹⁸⁰ Curran, *Directions*, 23.

¹⁸¹ Grecco, *A Theology of Compromise*, 169.

¹⁸² Curran, *Directions*, 24.

¹⁸³ Curran, *Directions*, 23.

¹⁸⁴ Grecco, *A Theology of Compromise*, 166.

longer morally relevant in a revised natural law theory, at least the external act remains relationally relevant. In turn, “decision-making” has the task of recognizing the temporal and relational aspects of the moral situation. This posits a direct relation between model and decision-making that Curran does not develop.

Curran insists on the existential operation of conscience as the most reliable guide to authenticity and to “moral conversion...to values apprehended, affirmed and realized by a real self-transcendence.”¹⁸⁵ This seems one-sided, since the conclusions of conscience can be tested. Good choices lead to the formation of a virtuous character. Character, in turn, shapes the person and removes barriers to good decision-making. Subjective conscience can be tested by the quality of the relationships created by the choices that connect the person to the world of which the person is part. Curran acknowledges all of these factors, but does not include them in an account of how conscience attains authenticity. Grecco criticizes the absence of objective criteria for the particular judgments of conscience, with the result that “Curran’s use of critical consciousness as a criterion...is more exhortative than substantive.”¹⁸⁶ If traditional natural law approach is guilty of following an ideal depiction of nature, Curran seems to be guided by an ideal depiction of conscience.¹⁸⁷

Curran, in the end, suggests that an adequate paradigm for authenticating the judgment of conscience is that of “mixed consequentialism.”¹⁸⁸ Mixed consequentialism focuses on the external acts and, within a relation-response model, attempts to judge their impact on the growth of the subject and on the good for the total human society. For Grecco, this model places “the emphasis on personhood on the one hand as a criterion of the external act while on the other hand stressing the external act as partly constitutive of that very criterion” and is an example of “a kind of circular analysis.”¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁵ Curran, *Directions*, 241.

¹⁸⁶ Grecco, *A Theology of Compromise*, 166.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 166.

¹⁸⁸ Curran, *Directions*, 21-22.

¹⁸⁹ Grecco, *A Theology of Compromise*, 171.

C. Summary: Methodological concerns

In the classicist natural law paradigm a normative ethical role was assigned to nature, understood in the abstract. In Curran's revisionist paradigm, that normative role is given to human experience. The persuasiveness of this shift depends on how effective Curran's method is in being able to determine the authenticity of human experience. Human experience is historical, personal, and transcendental. Thus, a revised methodology assumes historical mindedness (a new understanding of nature), a dynamic, relational understanding of the human (a new anthropology), and a transcendental approach to moral knowledge and responsibility (a new notion of natural law). In this newer thinking, moral concepts, values, and principles are not concretized in any universally valid sense. Instead, universality is sought in the limitless openness of the moral questioning that is "immanent in our conscious and intentional operations"¹⁹⁰ and, therefore, common to all persons.

Moral theology, *qua* theology, has the double task of interpreting human situations in terms of general human morality and of response to God, who is present as grace to all, in every part of humanity, and co-temporal with human history. In responding to this task, Curran appears to employ three distinct methods—as if no one method is adequate. These approaches or methods can be indicated as follows: (1) In rising to the challenges inherent in this double task, Curran embraces a transcendental methodology, using Lonergan's levels of consciousness as the structure through which human awareness passes from experience to moral responsibility. In his treatment of conscience, Curran proposes his method as (in Lonergan's meaning) a "normative pattern of recurrent and related operations yielding cumulative and progressive results."¹⁹¹ (2) Curran's effort to apply this methodology to the theological task of mediating human morality and faith leads to the development of a second ethical-methodical approach: stance, model, person, and decision-making. (3) Suggesting that "mixed consequentialism" is the most effective manner of arriving at moral judgments introduces another approach. Each of these ethical methods functions differently: the first uncovers general moral meaning; the second relates moral meaning (human experience) to the Christian tradition (Christian experience); and the third judges acts in relation to

¹⁹⁰ Lonergan, *Method*, 19.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

outcomes and values. Curran rarely uses the first approach; the second (as has already been pointed out) risks regressing into abstractions; the third attempts to rescue moral judgment from the ambiguity of stance, model, and person. In addition, the third method, mixed consequentialism suffers from circular reasoning. Curran's practice of a triple methodology results in ambiguity about how the various elements of the three methods impact on or inform each other, especially when it is not clear which methodology has the lead function at any point in the ethical process.

If the theory of the first method (the invariant structure of cognition) most adequately reflects the historical consciousness, personalism, and the transcendental thrust of all human knowing and choosing, then it must also be the normative base line for any other approach. It would have to be repeated at each stage of Curran's characteristic method of stance, model, person, and decision. Moreover, it is not enough for Curran to simply explain what mixed consequentialism is meant to do;¹⁹² its conclusions must be validated by reference to the transcendental process of knowing.¹⁹³ Under closer scrutiny, Curran's methodological proposals are not as structured or patterned as they first appear. Their operations do not recur consistently nor are they related to each other in any rigorous manner. It is questionable how effectively his proposals can lead to cumulative and progressive results, in Lonergan's sense, much less arrive at even an approximate "virtually unconditioned."

His approach also appears to confuse the distinction between the light of faith and the light of human experience. Curran roots his method firmly in the assumption that faith and reason do not contradict or exclude each other. He also acknowledges that there is no way of really knowing who is an anonymous Christian or that an act of conscience is authentic. His purpose of providing a method that can mediate between human experience and Christian experience correctly assumes that human living is meaning making, evaluative, and reflects the transcendental thrust of human intentionality. However, the confusion of methods leads to a circular movement of formulating the meaning of Christian beliefs in terms of general human experience and formulating the meaning of human experience in terms of Christian beliefs. The individual's reality, socially and historically matrixed by one's relationships (from cosmic to intra-personal,

¹⁹² Curran, *Directions*, 21-22.

¹⁹³ See Lonergan, *Method*, 6-20.

with all its possibilities, paradoxes, and problems) is the source of moral wisdom, according to Curran. Human experience is never merely neutral; it always has moral and, ultimately, religious meaning. For human experience to be an authentic source, a *locus theologicus*, of moral wisdom for Christians, there must be an explicit dialectic between the light of faith and the light of human experience. Curran suggests that this dialogue must take place, but he does not build into his method any structure, stage, or pattern in which this dialogue occurs. One is left with the impression that reasonableness becomes the criterion of faith, that what is reasonable is also moral and religious. If this is so, then Curran's method does not mediate, but asserts that something is mediating, by virtue of its human reasonableness.

There are also material weaknesses in Curran's proposition. He assumes, for example, that stance reflects a full Christian perspective. However, as John A. Coleman observes, naming five mysteries of faith by no means creates a full Christian perspective:

There are multiple and conflicting theological views of creation, sin, incarnation, redemption and resurrection-destiny. Various ethicists could cover all the bases and come up with quite varied positions.¹⁹⁴

Besides the fact that Curran's explanation of the mysteries is cursory and their formality defies an operative understanding of how they inform various moral options, Curran does not explain how he arrives at these meanings for the mysteries and thus leaves this issue totally out of critical view.

Curran's approach to scripture is also flawed. On the one hand, he uses scripture as a source of the theological mysteries, ethical model, virtues, and values that appear are part of his method. On the other hand, he steers away from understanding these values historically, in the human experiences in which they emerged and to which they gave meaning. Curran's "total Christian perspective," marred by theological abstraction, narrows the meaning and weakens the force of the biblical symbols, images, and ideas. Removed from the deep encounter with God that generated them, these ideas risk becoming "a false norm for the story of Jesus by projecting [the ethicist's] own values and biases onto it."¹⁹⁵

In order to relate human experience to Christian experience, the experience of the biblical communities to the experience of the contemporary church, a revised natural law methodology must take

¹⁹⁴ John A. Coleman, "Review Symposium: *American Catholic Social Ethics: Twentieth Century Approaches*, by Charles E. Curran," *Horizons* 9 (Fall, 1982): 331.

¹⁹⁵ Spohn, 11.

the origins of religious faith more seriously. Rather than being prevented from grasping the moral meaning of the scriptures by what Curran calls the hermeneutical *problem*, one could employ what Sandra Schneiders describes as the hermeneutical *approach*. Schneiders validates concern that “the mind which encounters the ancient text is a contemporary mind bringing into the text new questions and a new context of understanding,” but she sees this positively. In her view, this situation constitutes “an experience which has the power to transform us in the encounter between the text and the interpreter. Thus every experience of genuine understanding...is potentially new and always somewhat different from its predecessors.”¹⁹⁶ In this approach the text does not stand outside of or above the process of ethical reflection, but is part of the dynamic process of the believer’s (church’s) seeking faith and moral discernment. The structural framework of Curran’s method risks relegating scripture exclusively to the function of “stance” and excluding it from the core of the moral reasoning process. As a corollary of this, the meaning of the other steps of his method (for example, model as “covenantal relationship,” or person as the rhythm of the “pascal mystery”) is limited by the parameters of stance or perspective and it becomes unclear how they inform the moral consciousness and judgments of the Christian. These examples also exemplify the circularity of Curran’s methodology. The theological determination of the biblical mysteries, for example, limits the possibilities inherent in the human situation. The human limitations, thus imposed, control the meaning of the biblical text.

Moral theologians experience and witness “with both terror and bliss, to the analogical back and forth between affirmation and negation before the abyss of God’s incomprehensibility.”¹⁹⁷ As humans, Christian ethicists readily admit the enormity of knowledge (of the world, history and human behavior) and the impossibility of any one science, let alone any one person being able to speak with final authority and certitude. These realizations make one acutely aware not only of the provisional character of moral theological knowledge, but of a dialogical imperative for moral theology.¹⁹⁸ Method must provide what

¹⁹⁶ Sandra M. Schneiders, “New Testament Reflections on Peace and Nuclear Arms,” *Catholics and Nuclear War: A Commentary on “The Challenge of Peace,” The U.S. Bishops’ Pastoral Letter on War and Peace*, ed. Philip J. Murnion (New York: Crossroad, 1983): 94.

¹⁹⁷ Karl Rahner, “Experiences of a Catholic Theologian,” *Theological Studies* 61 (2000): 7.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

Lonergan calls “a framework for collaborative creativity.”¹⁹⁹ While Curran’s approach calls for and insists on dialogue, it provides little direction for how ethical dialogue occurs. The structure or framework of his method reflects the process of individual conscience. It remains to be seen both how Curran’s method will be inclusive of dialogue and whether a method so closely modeled on individual consciousness is an apt instrument for advancing Roman Catholic social ethics.

¹⁹⁹ Lonergan, *Method*, xi.

CHAPTER THREE

CURRAN AND THE CATHOLIC SOCIAL ETHICS TRADITION

I made a decision in the early seventies to concentrate my work in the area of social and political ethics. It seemed to me that this was the area in which the teaching of the church needed to be probed at greater depth and put into practice on a daily basis.¹

A. The Project: Curran's turn toward social ethics

By the early 1970s, Curran had detailed his positions on what appeared to be the most pressing issues of personal morality at that time. However, it was evident to him that the attention paid to personal morality was diverting interest from the social problems of urgent concern throughout the world. "Our theology and our church life can no longer remain privatized and divorced from the human struggle for freedom and justice in the world in which we live."² The expansion of Curran's interest into the area of social ethics was not a retreat from personal ethics and the controversial positions developed in his fundamental moral theology, but a logical unfolding of his own theological project and a positive response to the task given to moral theology by the Second Vatican Council. Moreover, in view of Rome's negative reaction to his positions, further writing on personal ethics could only lead to a hardening of an already seemingly irreversible polarization. In Richard McCormick's words, "a stand-off has been reached and further discussion appears non-productive."³

Curran's methodological commitment to natural law and the need to revise its understanding and use in ethical reasoning, accompanies his turning to political and social ethics--the area of church teaching

¹ Charles E. Curran, "Destructive Tensions in Moral Theology," in *The Church in Anguish: Has the Vatican Betrayed Vatican II?* ed. Hans Kueng and Leonard Swidler. (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987), 273-4.

² Curran, *Transition and Tradition*, 51.

³ McCormick, "Moral Theology 1940-1989," 19.

that, as he stated, needs to be “probed at greater depth.”⁴ Consistent with his orientation toward practice, Curran does not propose to produce a “sustained philosophical basis for moral [social] theology,”⁵ but to uncover and explore what prevents social ethics from taking hold in the daily lives of Catholics and the church. Social, political reality is a constitutive part of the historical-social matrix in which a Christian responds to the transcendent possibility, characteristic of human being.

For Curran, this development of Roman Catholic ethics depends on having a theology that insists that God often and usually acts indirectly with human beings--through the medium of creation and not just through Jesus Christ, through the medium of the ongoing tradition and not just through the revelation in scripture, through the “koinonia” of the Christian church with its hierarchical teaching office and not just through the immediate I-Thou relationship between God and the individual.⁶

Curran’s work in social ethics is a commitment to carry the methodological insights, gained in his discussion of foundational issues of meaning and method, into the arena of the social concerns that society must respond to in shaping the kind of world human beings will live in.

Social ethics examines the cultural, scientific, technological, social and economic realities that inform the problems and questions that are becoming more frequently part of public debate and policy. For example, debates on government funding or legislation for therapeutic and experimental medical procedures raise concerns about their impact on society. Genetics, human experimentation, sterilization, and abortion are medical issues that go beyond the confines of personal or medical ethics and reach into the area of public moral discourse. The church and the Christian are part of the world and have a mission to the world. These interests also echo the concerns of the Pastoral Constitution on the church in the Modern World.⁷

In Curran’s project, the church and Christian not only are observers and moral critics of the world, but also participants, co-responsible with all of humanity for its welfare, taking up the double focus of the Council: the world, as God’s creation and the object of God’s loving salvation; the church, as sacrament of the world, along with the need for this community of faith to develop the social dimension of its life and

⁴ Curran, *Ongoing Revision*, 284.

⁵ Charles E. Curran, *Faithful Dissent* (Kansas City, Mo.: Sheed and Ward, 1986), 95.

⁶ Curran, *Ongoing Revision*, 284.

⁷ *Gaudium et Spes*, Part II, *Vatican II*, 948-1001.

witness. Curran echoes the Council's reminder that a division between faith and daily life in the world and society is an unacceptable distortion of the church's message in his willingness to address "the need to relate Christianity to daily living"⁸ and to join the effort of "contemporary theology and hierarchical teaching...to see social morality more intimately connected with faith itself."⁹ Theologically this response is often described as discerning God's saving presence and action in the world, through "reading the signs of the time and interpreting them in the light of the gospel."¹⁰ To rise to the task, the church needs "to develop better a theology of the meaning of the world, earthly realities, work, technology, culture, art, leisure, etc."¹¹

Vatican II was unique in terms of ecumenical councils, in that "no ecumenical council in history had ever, in its formal agenda, dealt with questions of the temporal order."¹² In addressing these questions, the church "had to start with a consideration of the problems of the world and to speak to mankind at large in its own terms and with arguments it could understand and accept."¹³ In the years following the Council, however, it became apparent that "Catholic thinkers of the time lacked an adequate framework for expressing a view of history"¹⁴ that could achieve these expectations.

Curran's turn to social ethics centers on his attempt to develop such a framework. He includes in it, the importance of action and the necessity for morally informed strategies of action as part of moral theology's role.

The Christian is called upon to build up the new heaven and the new earth by his actions which means that good intentions are not sufficient. The complex ethical problems facing our modern society...cannot be solved merely by good intentions, since there are some ways more appropriate than others for solving these problems.¹⁵

A Christian understanding of the world is dynamic, oriented to change and development.

⁸ Curran, *A New Look*, 53.

⁹ Charles E. Curran, *Critical Concerns in Moral Theology* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), xiii.

¹⁰ *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 4., *Vatican Council II*, 905.

¹¹ Curran, *Christian Morality Today*, 127.

¹² Marcos McGrath, "Social Teaching Since the Council: A Response from Latin America," in *Vatican II Revisited by those who were there*, ed. Alberic Stacpoole (Minneapolis, Minn.: Winston Press, 1986) 327.

¹³ *Ibid.* 328.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 329.

¹⁵ Curran, *Contemporary Problems*, 25.

Concern for the world aims not only at effecting substantive changes in social structures but also in a renewal of the church community and the spirituality of its members.¹⁶ By the methods employed and the theology presupposed moral theology must be in a position to connect “the call of the Christian to perfection and the need for a more faithful response to the Gospel in social life...[by developing] at greater depth the Christian recognition of the responsibilities to change society.”¹⁷ The reign of God has a “cosmic and social dimension,” as well as a personal one.¹⁸ Moral theology recognizes the need to move beyond personal morality and endeavors to relate history and human participation in history to the call of God, for “the Christian is called not only to change his own heart but also to change the social, political, economic, and cultural structures of human existence.”¹⁹

Curran writes within an American context and from the perspective of a theology that is culturally and historically influenced by and participates in that particular culture and society. Although American Catholic social thought has been concerned primarily with the economic and political orders, the social dimensions of life in the world are broader and more inclusive than what is covered by these categories. Consequently, the scope of Curran’s interest takes in the more general question: “how [should] the church and the individual Christians...act in the social realm.”²⁰

The Council’s commitment to a cooperative and constructive relationship with the modern world reminds Curran that the church exists to serve society and to promote true human values.²¹ He is equally aware that, quite apart from the visible church, there is a public social conscience that sees economic, political, and social issues as moral issues that warrant critical analysis and political action.²² Social ethics cannot be developed by moral theology in isolation from such broader social movements. Without openness to these movements for “change, even radical change”²³ that occur throughout the world, in

¹⁶ See Paul Steidl-Meier, *Social Justice Ministry: Foundations and Concerns* (New York: Le Jacq Publications, 1984), 286-310.

¹⁷ Curran, *Ongoing Revision*, 290.

¹⁸ Curran, *A New Look*, 53.

¹⁹ Curran, *A New Look*, 65.

²⁰ Charles E. Curran, *American Catholic Social Ethics: Twentieth Century Approaches* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982), 2.

²¹ Curran, *A New Look*, 67.

²² Curran, *A New Look*, 61.

²³ Curran, *Dialogue*, 135.

secular society, and within the Catholic church, moral theology lessens its ability to grasp and respond to the problems it addresses.²⁴

The uniqueness of this “next step” in Curran’s moral theology project is best understood in relation to the challenge that Catholic moral theology faced as a result of the new openness to the world proclaimed by Vatican II. Many of the ideas that become critical to his attempt to uncover the “moral meaning in the midst of our complex time and culture”²⁵ are exposed in his historical critique of Roman Catholic social teachings. In this way it will become clearer to what extent Curran’s insights into methodology (developed in his writings on personal morality), become operative in his work on social morality, contribute toward the unity of the two, and carry out his commitment to structure a theology that is no longer “privatized and divorced from the human struggle for freedom and justice in the world in which we live.”²⁶

B. Vatican II: Social ethics and the *aggiornamento* of moral theology.

The Italian word *aggiornamento* conveys the sense of bringing something up to date. In reference to the church, it implies reform and renewal of its mission “to bring all men the light of Christ”²⁷ and to “reveal in the world, faithfully, however darkly, the mystery of her Lord until, in the consummation, it shall be manifested in full light.”²⁸ The themes of renewal, reform, and *aggiornamento* together bespeak a dynamic understanding of the church, a consciousness that the church comes to know itself and becomes known in action in relation to the world and history. At the same time, the church’s identity is the source of this action.

The most significant result of Vatican II is the fundamental change in how the church understands itself. However, the Council did not work out the theological significance and practical implications of this new awareness. It has been left to the church (local and regional communities, theology, including moral theology, and the universal communion) to disclose and elaborate the meaning intended by the Council.

²⁴ Curran, *New Perspectives*, 87.

²⁵ Curran, *Ongoing Revision*, 289.

²⁶ Charles E. Curran, *Transition and Tradition*, 53.

²⁷ *Lumen Gentium*, n. 1, *Vatican II*, 350.

²⁸ *Lumen Gentium*, n. 8, *Vatican II*, 358.

*I. Vatican II and the new openness of the church to the world.*²⁹ The Second Vatican Council signaled a radical change in how the Roman Catholic church thought and spoke about itself, with significant implications for moral theology. Its openness to the world was not so much an accommodation to a cultural liberalism or special pressures to modernize an ancient institution, as reclamation of its inner nature and mission to humankind. The modernization of the church, from this perspective, manifests fidelity to its Lord and its mission. The dialogue with the world, which the Council anticipated, would exceed mere intellectual discussion and express in action a deep felt responsibility for the human future.

Rahner perceives this change in consciousness as the advent of a new phase in the church's life and history: the emergence of the church as world-church (*Weltkirche*).³⁰ The council was an event during which the church began to think of itself, in a formal and articulated fashion, as a world-church, seeing itself as the human race assembling in faith, worship, discourse, and service, as a sacrament of human solidarity in responding to the saving event of God in Jesus. In this action the church accepted its worldliness, both in the sense of its historical reality and its identification with humankind.³¹ The assembled bishops were a symbol of all human cultures and races called to be church. The genuine dialogue among the bishops, the influence on that dialogue of non-Catholic and non-Christian observers, and the attention of the world press suggest the church's openness to learn from each other and the

²⁹ There are many historical and theological studies of the Second Vatican Council. For the purposes of situating Curran's social ethics project within the changes going on in the Catholic church and specifically in moral theology, I have made use of the following theological interpretations of the significance of the Council for the church: Giuseppe Alberigo, "Treue und Kreativitaet bei der Rezeption des Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzils: Hermeneutische Kriterien," *Herausforderung Aggiornamento: Zur Rezeption des Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzils*, ed. Antonio Autiero (Altenberge: Oros Verlag, 2000), 13-35; Karl Rahner, "Theologische Grundinterpretation des II. Vatikanischen Konzils," *Schriften zur Theologie* XIV (Einsiedeln: Benziger Verlag, 1980), 288-89; Rahner, "Die Bleibende Bedeutung des II. Vatikanischen Konzils," *Schriften* XIV, 304-05 (English translation: "Basic Theological Interpretation of the Second Vatican Council," *Theological Investigations*, vol. 20, tr. Edward Quinn (New York: Crossroad, 1981) 77-89; "The Abiding Significance of the Second Vatican Council," *Theological Investigations*, vol. 20, 90-102; Karl Rahner, "Towards a Fundamental Theological Interpretation of Vatican II," in *Vatican II: The Unfinished Agenda*, ed. Lucien Richard, D.T. Harrington, J.W. O'Malley (New York: Paulist Press, 1987) 9-21.

³⁰ Karl Rahner, "Theologische Grundinterpretation."

³¹ Alberigo, "Treue und Kreativitaet," 17-20. Alberigo points out the implications of this consciousness for theological method, noting that history now becomes a *locus theologicus* that is recognized as a reality within which the church can and must nourish its own relentless seeking after the Kingdom of God.

experience of other cultures. The Catholic church, by its very composition and fruitful dialogue, became part of, rather than apart from, the world.

This new phase of the church's history leaves behind the culturally limited and historically conditioned European-Hellenistic ecclesial reality. Pope John XXIII clearly intended for the Council to be a transforming response to the Holy Spirit, a new Pentecost for the church, moving it into a new phase of its history.³² Changes were authorized that made it clear that the Roman Catholic church exists in and through the active participation of its members-- individuals and cultures. The Council's pastoral nature lies in its opening to the world.

This openness, however, had to be made actual. The church sought a new language and way of communicating that was more accessible, so that the gospel would not only be proclaimed, but also become truly incarnated in all parts of the world. The mandate to embody Christian revelation in new, non-European cultures implied a theological understanding of historically contingent human experience. The world would become a source of insight, from which theology could learn how to describe the church's pursuit of the kingdom of God less exclusively. The kingdom was not to be exclusive, but "a privileged place of friendship with humankind."³³ Learning involves dialogue, not just with a view toward the reconciliation of the Christian churches, but also as the church's desire for to the unity of humankind.

The theological task proceeding from this new ecclesial self-consciousness begins with the acknowledgement that the compromise nature of many of the declarations of Vatican II, the result of a desire for unanimity in its resolutions, means that many divergent theological and political currents remain unresolved.³⁴ Then, theology must learn how to dialogue with and learn from the great non-western and non-Christian religions, cultures, and societies. God's saving will is limited only by human refusal and God's self-communication occurs outside the parameters of the historical, verbal revelation that is constitutive of Christian faith. Theology needs a methodology that allows the church to learn from, as well as teach the world about God's saving presence and action. There is an explicit mutuality in the church's

³² Ibid. 16. Alberigo makes use of the traditional principle of "the will of the law-maker" as a warrant for the use of John XXIII's intention in calling the Council as a principle of the Council's interpretation.

³³ Ibid., 17.

³⁴ Rahner, "Fundamental Theological Interpretation", 10.

message to the world. What is proclaimed and celebrated as God's work within the church is occurring, as well, in life in the world.

From this actual and lived transformation of the church's self-consciousness come the beginnings of a world-theology or "a political theology."³⁵ A new "relationship with the secular world, which arises from its [church's] own nature and is not imposed on it by external circumstances,"³⁶ embodies the faith that the world and the church are both places where God manifests and communicates God's self to the humanity. The intellectual horizon of the theology of the European-Hellenistic church is not adequate for grasping this reality. As an intellectual discipline, theology must now be able to include local theologies, "the result of [Christians] coming to terms creatively with their own cultures."³⁷ The western theological tradition needs to adjust itself through openness to and dialogue with these other theologies and ways of knowing.

The council's attitude toward the world indicates the perspective a renewed social moral theology will adopt: an approach that is open to God's active presence in the events of history and the world. Theology, drawing upon its Christian beliefs, will create new categories of understanding that make the world more accessible to the church and the church to the world. In this theology the church understands itself as sacrament of the world and, confident in God's universal salvific will, proclaim:

That, with all the depths of its history and all the grim possibilities of its future, [the world] is embraced by God and his will, through whose unfathomable love God himself in his self-communication offers himself to the world as ground, power and goal, and of himself makes this offer effective in the freedom of history.³⁸

In this light, theological change involves a rethinking of the sources of Catholic faith and a rereading of the church's experience in history and contemporary society. Rahner and Alberigo offer assessments of the Council that demonstrate a radical change in the church's self-consciousness. Both thinkers point out the church's renunciation of any claims of being apart from or above the world, in order to "take her place among the creatures which groan and travail yet and await the revelation of the sons of

³⁵ Rahner, "Fundamental Theological Interpretation," 13.

³⁶ Rahner, "Abiding Significance," 92-3.

³⁷ Ibid. 96.

³⁸ Ibid. 102.

God.”³⁹ The church’s undertaking of solidarity with people struggling with secular affairs and of creating bonds that facilitate human unity is an expression of the church’s supernatural mission,⁴⁰ for it “is in the nature of a sacrament—a sign and an instrument—that is of communion with God and of unity among all men.”⁴¹

2. Significance of opening to the world: social ethics and the Roman Catholic church’s self-identity.

Several themes emerge in the Council that, either through inclusion in the language of its documents or through the public reactions they stirred, or a combination of both have become part of the life of the church. Catholic church historian Otto H. Pesch sees in these themes an image of the church that was not only unexpected, but in contrast to the ideas that were taken for granted by a pre-conciliar church, utterly revolutionary.⁴² In calling for reform in liturgy, the Council stresses the dignity of each person and affirms the value of the many cultures of the world that must be part of the structure and mentality of each liturgy.⁴³ Participation of all in the church’s worship—as individuals and as cultural communities—signals “a profound shift in sensibility and awareness on the part of believers and marks[s] a decidedly different stance toward the larger world.”⁴⁴ As the church worships God in the lives and communion of all its members, it follows that the church’s activity in the world takes place through the lives and actions of its members and not just through the words or initiatives of the hierarchy.

³⁹ *Lumen Gentium*, n. 48, *Vatican Council II*, 408.

⁴⁰ The Kingdom of God is conceptualized in *Lumen Gentium* in relational terms. The church is a sign of, but not identical with the Kingdom. The necessity of bringing personal and social morality together within an overarching view of Christian life in the world is evident in the Council’s teaching that “God has decided to save men and make them holy, not as individuals without any bond or link between them, but rather to make them into a people who might acknowledge him and serve him in holiness.” *Lumen Gentium*, n. 9, *Vatican II*, 359.

⁴¹ *Lumen Gentium*, n. 1, *Vatican II*, 350.

⁴² Otto R. Pesch, “Das Zweite Vatikanische Konzil: 40 Jahre nach der Ankuendigung – 34 Jahre Rezeption?” *Herausforderung Aggiornamento: zur Rezeption des Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzils*, ed. Antonio Autiero (Altenberge: Oros Verlag, 2000), 56-63, 70. It is not just the more obvious decrees of the Council—Ecumenism (*Unitatis Redintegratio*), Religious Liberty (*Dignitatis Humanae*), or the church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*)—that redefine the church and its relationship with the world. The Constitutions on the Sacred Liturgy (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*), Divine Revelation (*Dei Verbum*), and the church (*Lumen Gentium*) adopt models and language to describe the church’s inner nature and relation to the Word of God that impact on and set the tone for its social and religious commitments to the world. See Robert J. Schreiter, “The Impact of Vatican II,” *The Twentieth Century: A Theological Overview*, ed. Gregory Baum (Ottawa: Novalis, 1999), 162-63.

⁴³ *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, nn. 13, 14, *Vatican II*, 7, 13.

⁴⁴ Schreiter, 163.

Pesch also points out that in *Dei Verbum* the Council adopts “a historical understanding of the self-communication of God [which is found] not in instructions and decrees, but in historical events, which need to be always interpreted anew.”⁴⁵ The remarkable and revolutionary import of this understanding lies in this: it throws open the question of where God is communicating God’s self in the world today, legitimates theological investigation, and invites questioning in the church.⁴⁶ Dialogue is not only permitted, it is required.

Lumen Gentium provides “the charter for renewal and reform”⁴⁷ of the church. In contrast to earlier images of the church as “perfect society” or “mystical body of Christ,” the council speaks of a church that can be imperfect, needs to change, and continually seeks the unity and wholeness of the kingdom of God, without ever being identical with that kingdom. As “Pilgrim” in the world, the church is the “People of God,” recognizing what it has in common with the rest of humankind. As “Sacrament,” the church strives, in response to grace, to be both a sign of the human longing for reconciliation in the world and of the grace of God that empowers that reunification. Finally, the image of church as “Communion” models how men and women can, in a pluralistic world, come together in universal unity while maintaining the unique differences inherent in their particularity.⁴⁸

The council’s proclamation that “the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the men of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted in any way,”⁴⁹ relates the inner life of the church with its mission to the world, including other churches, religions, and humanistic movements. Of course, when the council expresses the desire to sit at the same table and discuss issues such as human rights, world community, freedom of conscience, political and social life, it can expect to be questioned by the world as to its right to be in the dialogue, as well as its credibility.⁵⁰ The church’s presence at the table of secular affairs also means a role of partner and learner, openness to wisdom both in the expertise and experience of others and in all relevant knowledge. This new humility is embraced with a hope the church’s contributions

⁴⁵ Pesch, 61(my translation).

⁴⁶ Ibid. 59.

⁴⁷ Schreiter, 163.

⁴⁸ Pesch, 50-1; Schreiter, 163-5.

⁴⁹ *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 1, *Vatican II*, 903.

⁵⁰ Pesch, 69.

will show “that the people of God and the human race, which is its setting, render service to each other; and the mission of the church will show itself to be supremely human by the very fact of being religious.”⁵¹

Although many of the dogmatic and pastoral positions adopted by Roman Catholicism at the council had their precursors in the century that preceded it, the council’s positions and directions represent a radical break with pre-conciliar theology and official church practice. The church cherishes “a deep solidarity with the human race and its history.”⁵² When the church talks about the world, it is talking about itself; when speaking of itself (as Sacrament, People of God, or recipient of Revelation), it is speaking about the meaning of history and human experience. Thus, a key issue of morality for Roman Catholics—faithfulness to the Lord—takes on a necessary connection with the world and sets the stage for a renewal of social ethics in the church .

3. *Significance of the “modern world”: a context of optimism.* Since the 1940s, the process of dismantling Europe’s colonial empire had been going on inexorably. By the 1950s and 60s, the new reality of non-aligned or “third” world nations was emerging, awakening in many a hope for a new world political and economic order. A humanistic face was appearing on Marxism and the confidence of a “new springtime,” even in the face of repression, created expectations of increased enjoyment of human rights and freedoms.⁵³ The promise of a “new frontier,” the civil rights and women’s movement in the United States, and the international protests and actions for peace were all part of the social reality in which the Second Vatican Council’s ideas and commitments were heard. The urgency of the issues that brought unarmed civilians face to face with tanks, citizens into conflict with their governments, and filled streets with demonstrators buoyed by utopian dreams, gave the church’s engagement in the new social questions an independent impetus, which “contributed to the impact the council had in coming to terms with modernity.”⁵⁴ The Council’s commitment to the world threw the church into a great practical dialogue with modernity and an

⁵¹ *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 11, *Vatican II*, 912.

⁵² *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 1, *Vatican II*, 903-4.

⁵³ See Helmuth Rolfes, *Der Sinn des Lebens im marxistischen Denken* (Dusseldorf: Patmos Verlag, 1971), 118-203. Rolfes provides an in-depth study of the humanistic movement within Marxism through the ideas of revisionists Adam Schaff, Leszek Kolakowski, Henri Lefebvre, Milan Machovec, and Ernst Bloch.

⁵⁴ Schreiter, 168.

inquest into the sources of its own identity. It was a task that turned out to be more difficult and more divisive than the optimism of the time suggested.

C. Traditions of Roman Catholic social ethics

One way to explore the relationship between Charles Curran and the social ethical traditions of the church would be to attempt a summary of various documents and movements within an overall view of their ethical content and historical contexts. This approach, however, constitutes a study in itself and would add little to the understanding of Curran's theological purposes and method. While the descriptive exercise would supply information for a reader unfamiliar with the tradition, there are many works available, which document the major features of this tradition, discuss their basic principles and themes, and offer insightful comparisons and analyses. My purpose here is not to provide a critical analysis of Catholic tradition of social teaching, but to demonstrate how Curran's interpretation of the tradition leads him to the conviction of the usefulness and necessity of his own approach to social ethics.

Curran's project, while similar to that of other Catholic theologians,⁵⁵ is distinguished by its primary interest in methodology. He seeks a way to structure moral inquiry, so that it reflects the new insights behind the church's desire and need to dialogue with the modern world. As well, he seeks to model the kind of discernment process that should result in credible decisions in specific, concrete situations. The goal of this chapter is to identify how Curran thinks moral theology should encounter and learn from the ethical issues pressing on the church and world.

Curran prefers a natural law approach, because an ethical dialogue with the world can only be successful if conducted in a moral language that is accessible equally to those with Christian faith and those without it. He does not call what he is doing "natural law," however, in order to set off his historical, inductive, relational, and theologically thematic approach from that of the neo-Scholastic understanding of natural law. He continues his pursuit of critical moral realism, which maintains many of the theological

⁵⁵ See, for example, Johann Baptist Metz, *Zur Theologie der Welt* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1968).

principles of the natural law tradition, while revising their content in the light of the change in worldview, from the classicist mentality to that of modernity.

In order to establish a position from which to critically evaluate what Curran is doing, it is necessary to examine how he sees himself within the tradition of Roman Catholic social teaching. A meaningful critique of Curran requires that his project be located also within the social ethical tradition that developed in the United States over the past one hundred years.

*1. Curran and Official Catholic Social Teaching.*⁵⁶ The modern tradition of official Catholic social teaching began during the pontificate of Leo XIII (1878-1903), the culmination of a growing consciousness within the church in Europe of the deteriorating conditions of the working class. The situation seriously threatened “to undercut the established political order in Europe.”⁵⁷ In the view of some, it also put the church at risk, because the abuses of capitalism threatened the faith of its members and the allure of socialism augured “massive defections”⁵⁸ from the church. Curran’s review of the papal tradition of social ethics is divided into two phases, “pre-Vatican II” and “Vatican II and after,” reflecting what he considers two distinct methodologies.

a. The papal tradition before Vatican II. The encyclicals and official pronouncements that make up the pre-Vatican II tradition reveal a gradual, but mostly unacknowledged modernization of Catholic social thought, an attempt to keep the church’s teachings in synchronization with the historical forms of society in which the Christian life is to be lived. At the same time, these changes make clear to Curran that natural law social theory is not capable of shaping the Christian response within a historical understanding of human living. Despite vast differences in issues and responses in the social encyclicals from Leo XIII to John XXIII, these texts must be viewed together, because they share the same methodological approach: an almost exclusive reliance on natural law along with its deductive methodology.⁵⁹ Curran’s observations will be

⁵⁶ Charles E. Curran, “The Changing Anthropological Bases of Catholic Social Ethics,” *Catholic Social Ethics*, 5-42; “A significant Methodological Change in Catholic Social Ethics,” *Catholic Social Ethics*, 43-69.

⁵⁷ David M. Byers, ed., *Justice in the Marketplace*,: Collected Statements of the Vatican and the U.S. Catholic Bishops on Economic Policy, 1891-1984 (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference and National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1985), 9.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, 43-45.

summarized under the themes of stance, model, anthropology, and decision-making, in order to see them in terms of his methodological purposes.

Stance. The stance of these teachings is defined by their conception of and adherence to natural law. Theologically, this is grounded in the church's affirmation of the basic goodness of creation. "Human nature as God's created gift can discern how God wants human beings to act."⁶⁰ Foundational to the papal teaching is the assumption that there exists a plan of God for creation, that this plan can be known by human beings through human reason, and that the principles and order learned in that process are applicable to every society.⁶¹

How strongly does the turmoil of individual men and peoples contrast with the perfect order of the universe...But the Creator of the world has imprinted into man's heart an order which his conscience reveals to him and enjoins him to obey...By these laws men are most admirably taught, first of all they should conduct their mutual dealings among themselves, then how the relationships between citizens and the public authorities of each state should be regulated, then how states should deal with each other, and finally how, on the one hand individual men and states, and on the other hand the community of all peoples, should act towards each other...⁶²

This approach also assumes a two-layer morality and a distinction of order between church and state or society: a natural order, governed by natural law and human reason and a supernatural order, directed by grace and gospel.

Model. The encyclicals, basing their moral insights for society on the assumption of an unchanging order and eternal law, interpret social ethics from a deontological model. Moreover, when human social behavior is conformed and social life structured in accord with the divine plan, individuals progress toward their supernatural goal. Thus, Pius XI states:

But it is only the moral law which, just as it commands us to seek our supreme and last end in the whole scheme of activity, so likewise commands us to seek directly in each kind of activity those purposes, which we know that nature, or rather God the Author of nature, established for that kind of action, and in orderly relationship to subordinate such immediate purposes to our supreme and last end.⁶³

Person. The implication of stance for the anthropology of the popes' teachings is evident in their understanding of the state and the relationship between the individual and society. Although all the pontiffs

⁶⁰ Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, 44.

⁶¹ Curran, *Dialogue*, 118-19.

⁶² John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris*, nn. 1-7, *Justice in the Marketplace*, 151.

⁶³ Pius XI, *Quadragesimo Anno*, n. 44, *Justice in the Marketplace*, 57.

steer a middle road between socialism and liberal capitalism, they differ in their understanding of society. For Leo XIII, society and state coincide within a hierarchically ordered, organic whole, in which individuals participate unequally, according to capacities and social status. The freedom that Leo accords the individual (the right to private property, the right to organize) is founded on the spiritual dignity of the person and limited by the hierarchical ordering of society.⁶⁴

Pius XI, in a cautious opening to modernity, offers guarded support for a societal role for human freedom and dignity. Pius sees little hope for a reform of the state and proposes a radical restructuring of society based on a corporate ideal in which industrial and professional guilds would work for their own interests and contribute to social harmony. Pius introduces a distinction between society and state, which assumes a more neutral role for the state and restricts its authority and responsibility by the principle of subsidiarity.

The same realism toward the state is evidenced in the thought of Pius XII (1939-1958), whose social views respond more to the political organization of society, than to the socio-economic issues addressed by his predecessors. Pius XII affirms individual human rights in terms of responsible citizenship, in a context of defense against and opposition to totalitarian forms of government.

With John XXIII, although he remains within the natural law perspective, ethical reflection begins with the concrete reality of the interdependence of nations and complexity of social relations. He proposes a historical understanding of human freedom and dignity, which sees natural rights in terms of the concrete social relationships that characterize the world. A well-ordered society, facilitative of the attainment of the common good, is based not only on truth, justice, and love, but also on freedom. In John's thought, freedom is seen as a political reality, apart from the ideological impasse of its nineteenth-century liberalist assumptions.

Although the popes' anthropology is based consistently on the transcendent dignity and social nature of the person, these teachings betray enormous differences in the concrete implications of human sociability and dignity. The goal of social change for both Leo and Pius XI is to undo the disorder of

⁶⁴ *Rerum Novarum*, nn. 26-28, *Justice in the Marketplace*, 19-20.

society, reestablish harmonious relationships between various social groups or classes, and bring civil authority back into a positive relationship with divine authority.⁶⁵ Leo views the state (and specifically its rulers) as responsible for reordering society, while Pius restricts the role of state, proposing instead a social restructuring that gives responsibility for change to a not yet existing set of professional and industrial guilds.⁶⁶ Pius XII supports a democratic process, guided by Catholic ethical principles. John XXIII, viewing the world as an intricate and complex social system proposes a multi-leveled understanding of responsibility, calling for cooperation and participation of individuals, groups, and governments on an international, as well as local terrain.

Decision-making. Decisions are made to accord with the norms and the principles of natural law. The law of nature itself is applied deductively to present circumstances. Also, the church has the right, as well as competence to “interpose her authority...in all things that are connected with the moral law.”⁶⁷ John XXIII, while retaining for the church the authority “to decide whether the bases of a given social order are in accord with the unchangeable order...fixed in the natural law and revelation,”⁶⁸ calls for dialogue with those outside the church, in order to achieve the understanding and good will necessary to improve the structures and institutions that mediate social life.

While Curran acknowledges many positive aspects in the tradition, he criticizes its natural law stance as limiting its ability to understand what is happening. “Theologically and philosophically the papal natural law methodology had difficulty coping with the reality of historicity and change.” An ideal original order of society, established in the very creation of the world, universally, absolutely, and unalterably valid, is not a paradigm for change. It may even construe change as somehow contradicting a “past order which appears to be the order willed by God.”⁶⁹ The implications for a Christian understanding of the world are significant. “In such a theory the transforming power of grace or redemption does not really affect the understanding of the natural.”⁷⁰ This robs social ethics of the “dynamic foundation” it requires, in order to

⁶⁵ *Rerum Novarum*, n. 33, *Justice in the Marketplace*, 21.

⁶⁶ Pius XI, *Quadragesimo Anno*, nn. 82-87, *Justice in the Marketplace*, 68-70.

⁶⁷ *Quadragesimo Anno*, n. 41, *Justice in the Marketplace*, 56.

⁶⁸ John XXIII, *Mater et Magistra*, n. 42.

⁶⁹ Curran, *Dialogue*, 137.

⁷⁰ Curran, *Dialogue*, 132.

understand change and the transformation of society as a specific response to the call of grace. The popes recognize, on the one hand, the historical particularity of the social issues; on the other hand, they respond from outside the socio-historical context, by appealing to a God-given plan.

Nevertheless, Curran's historical overview notes a progressive movement away from the absolute norm of an organic, ethical state to a cautious acceptance of the modern democratic state,⁷¹ in which a conflict can be seen between the effort of the popes to think historically and their belief in an ahistorical, eternal plan for society. On the one hand, the church accepts that the form of the state has changed significantly, so that the church now supports individual rights and affirms the value of democratic forms of government. On the other hand, the strong natural law character of Catholic social teaching tends to seek a single solution in an ideal of society that is rooted in nature (creation). The claim to timelessness and unchanging validity places natural law in some way outside of history. It deprives this approach of the creativity and sense of history that mark the issues and questions that make up the content of social ethics and prevents serious grappling with the meaning and normative value of historical, social events, developments, and tendencies for understanding human nature and social reality.⁷²

The assumption of natural law's universal accessibility through reason and conscience leans toward intolerance of pluralism and inhibits conversation with the world. Diversity is disvalued by the suggestion that only bad faith or ignorance stands in the way of harmonious agreement about what is right. Curran argues that if the historical experience of "disorder, a seeking for power, a spirit of aggressive self-aggrandizement both of individuals and nations"⁷³ were included in the moral perspective, the transparency of natural law could no longer be held. The reality and effects of sin on human reason suggest the need to accept a plurality of meanings, in place of expecting that all human beings will arrive at the knowledge of the same moral ideal.

Natural law's bifurcation of reality into natural and supernatural prolongs the dualism between church and society, reason and faith, ethically deduced principles and empirical analysis of the situation. Natural law, therefore, does not create a *lingua franca* for discussing, judging, and carrying out social

⁷¹ Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, 20.

⁷² Curran, *Dialogue*, 135-138; Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, 6-15.

⁷³ Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, 49-50.

change—with negative implications for the possibility of church-world dialogue and cooperation. For example, while the *magisterium* experienced tremendous difficulty in coming to terms with religious liberty, others took this new reality for granted.⁷⁴

As a result, the church's mission to the world is indirect—as moral judge of social reality. Its insistence on the right to interpret and apply natural law puts the church in a relationship of superiority to the world, instructing the world about its natural responsibilities. Suspicious of cooperation with other religions or social groups, the church prefers to establish its own social, economic, and political groups, such as its schools, labor associations and political parties.⁷⁵

Finally, the appeal to natural law, as a changeless and unitary ideal of society, obscures the historical and cultural particularity and biases of what the church proposes, placing its teaching beyond criticism and dissent. For example, Leo's defense of private property remains within a "rural and preindustrial perspective" (a piece of land as the fruit of one's labor) that prevents him from dealing "realistically with the most significant aspect of private property" at the root of the problems the encyclical purported to address.⁷⁶ The pretension that social teaching is the expression of an eternal plan of God inhibits critical self-reflection within this tradition. For example, the suggestion that Catholic social teaching forms a single, continuous doctrine makes it problematical to account for its development.

Curran's concern over methodology may oversimplify his assessment of the encyclicals' teachings and undervalue their contributions to a broader public discourse. In its historical context, for example, *Rerum Novarum* created a forum for rational discussion of the economic crisis, producing a "consistent...systematic framework within which to speak about the social order."⁷⁷ The encyclical not only affirmed the dignity and value of the person in society, it thrust into public consciousness a clear

⁷⁴ Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, 9, 17-18; Curran, *Dialogue*, 136-7.

⁷⁵ Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, 57. Often the contents of the encyclicals requested this kind of sectarianism. Leo wanted to insure that there were Christian institutions to provide leadership for social change, believing that the only way to guarantee the coherence of social practice with orthodox teachings was through institutions under the direction of the church. (see *Rerum Novarum*, nn. 28-9, *Justice in the Marketplace*, 20) Pius XI's support of "Catholic Action" sees the church as the source of the truth, virtue and solidarity that is needed for the bonds of society to strengthen. (see *Quadragesimo Anno*, n.8, *Ibid.*, 86.)

⁷⁶ Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, 9, 24-25.

⁷⁷ Patrick Carey, ed., *American Catholic Religious Thought* (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 42.

moral judgment on disputed issues such as just wage and *laissez faire* economies. John A. Ryan in the early part of the 20th century noted the practical importance of *Rerum Novarum*. Ryan's view suggests that the natural law methodology did not prevent the Pope from dealing with critical social questions historically.

At the beginning of the Encyclical, he [Leo XIII] declared that the condition of the working classes had come to be little better than slavery. This was a statement of fact, not a repetition of a general principle. It was not arrived at by deductive reasoning. Throughout the Encyclical, he deals constantly with the actual conditions of labor in all its relations. Hence the concreteness and usefulness of his moral pronouncements.⁷⁸

Likewise, despite Pius XI's social romanticism, he does not hesitate to launch into a concrete discussion of just wages and salaries.⁷⁹ His appeal for Catholic leaders to undertake the formation of the kinds of structures that affirm Christian and human values, could equally be construed as a call to prophetic and counter-cultural witness on the part of the church⁸⁰ and a realism in theory and strategies that is not entirely excluded by natural law method.

b. Vatican II and Its Aftermath. Curran takes the Second Vatican Council as the point where Catholic social teaching frees itself from its attachment to traditional natural law theory and speaks about the practical problems facing the world in light of "the gospel, grace, and the supernatural as having a direct relation to and an effect on the daily life of Christians in the world."⁸¹

Stance. The Council's insistence on understanding the issues facing the world in the light of human experience and of the gospel assumes that the world is permeated by the reality of the Christian mysteries and so able to make a normative contribution to Christian ethical consciousness.⁸² For Curran, the council's methodology "tries to integrate the natural law more fully into the whole schema of salvation history."⁸³ Human history is the history of God's relationship with the world, so that the "the previous dichotomy between the natural and the supernatural," between profane history and salvation history is overcome.⁸⁴

⁷⁸ John A. Ryan, *Questions of the Day* (Freeport, N.Y.: Books for Libraries Press, Inc., 1931; Boston: Stratford Co.: 1967), 223.

⁷⁹ *Quadragesimo Anno*, nn. 63-75, *Justice in the Marketplace*, 64-67.

⁸⁰ See Donal Dorr, *Option for the Poor: A Hundred Years of Vatican Social Teaching*, 74.

⁸¹ Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, 47.

⁸² Curran, *Dialogue*, 125-8.

⁸³ Curran, *Dialogue*, 135.

⁸⁴ Curran, *Dialogue*, 127.

Model. The church's theological perspective influences the model it uses for determining what must be done. A dynamic, developmental model leads Paul VI to posit the image of transcendental humanism embracing both personal and social aspirations as a normative ideal for social ethics.⁸⁵ He also stresses the importance of utopias and imagination for discerning "the mystery of man discovering himself to be God's son in the course of a historical and psychological process in which constraint and freedom as well as the weight of sin and the breath of the Spirit alternate and struggle for the upper hand."⁸⁶ The pontiff's openness to a "less rationalistic discernment process"⁸⁷ is a movement away from the traditional natural law split between "ethically deduced moral principles and the economic and social analysis of the situation."⁸⁸

Person. For Curran, these teachings now see the person as the subject of social, political, and economic change. "The dignity of the person requires that every individual enjoy the right to act freely and responsibly."⁸⁹ Equality and participation become concerns for social ethics. This new view of society regards the development of a social moral consciousness essential to social justice to balance, for example, the universal purpose of created goods with the right to private property.

Decision-making. Paul VI's open methodology influences the understanding of decision-making at work in official church teaching. The process of discovering moral wisdom in historical experience has important implications:

In the face of such widely varying situations it is difficult for us to utter a unified message and to put forward a solution which has universal validity... It is up to the Christian communities themselves to analyze with objectivity the situation which is proper to their own country, to shed on it the light of the Gospel's unalterable words ...It is up to these Christian communities, with the help of the Holy Spirit, in communion with the bishops who hold responsibility and in dialogue with other Christian brethren and all men of goodwill, to discern the options and commitments which are called for in order to bring about the social, political, and economic changes seen in

⁸⁵ Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio*, n. 16 (www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_26031967_populorum_en.html), downloaded March 31, 2002.

⁸⁶ Paul VI, *Octogesima Adveniens*, n. 37 (www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/apost_letters/d.../hf_p-vi_apl_19710514_octogesima-adveniens_en.htm), download April 1, 2002.

⁸⁷ Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, 21.

⁸⁸ *Octogesima Adveniens*, n. 37.

⁸⁹ Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, 14.

many cases to be urgently needed. Christians must first of all renew their confidence in the forcefulness and the special character of the demands made by the Gospel.⁹⁰

Thus, the expectation of certainty characteristic of the older approaches is abandoned and the locus of appropriate choice and action devolves to the whole church. Decision-making is no longer centralized in the *magisterium*, but is done through local discernment. Reflection on strategic possibilities in the concrete situations being considered becomes part of the process, because concrete responses “require the active involvement of all.”⁹¹

c. Curran's response: natural law ethics based in human experience. Curran's assessment of this new evaluation of natural law and the corresponding shift in methodology is generally positive.⁹² He finds three important methodological principles in the change: 1) developmental and historical conception of reality, 2) an integration of religious beliefs about salvation history with the historical process, and 3) a dynamic notion of human nature and human experience, understood as both an individual and social striving to make “life more human and to render the whole earth submissive to this goal.”⁹³ This innovation orients Catholic social ethics towards action and dialogue: action, as concrete engagement “in the struggle to strive for a more just social order”⁹⁴ and dialogue, as essential to understanding social reality and discerning the Christian ethical response. Curran also raises concerns about the newer approach. The stance is an overly optimistic construal of human reality and underestimates the limitations imposed by human finiteness and sinfulness on the possibility of social change. The emphasis of post-conciliar ethics “on the presence of the gospel and of redemption...[poses a temptation] to forget the impact of human sinfulness.”⁹⁵ These “signs of an overly realized eschatology,”⁹⁶ suggest a stance that is naïve and incomplete.⁹⁷

The historical understanding of human experience that marked the council's consideration of the signs of the times⁹⁸ requires further development. Working with the approach developed in his fundamental

⁹⁰ *Octogesima Adveniens*, n. 4.

⁹¹ Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, 20.

⁹² Curran, *Dialogue*, 125.

⁹³ Curran, *Dialogue*, 127.

⁹⁴ Curran, *Dialogue*, 125.

⁹⁵ Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, 50.

⁹⁶ Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, 51.

⁹⁷ Curran, *Dialogue*, 132.

⁹⁸ *Gaudium et Spes*, Part II, *Vatican II*, 948-1001.

moral theology, Curran proposes a two-step response to that challenge: “the logical first step in the systematic construction of a moral theology” is to work out a stance or perspective that is founded in the fivefold Christian mysteries of creation, sin, incarnation, redemption, and resurrection destiny. The second step involves probing the significance of historical consciousness more deeply.

Curran sees the papal emphasis on principles and concepts as “an extension of the older natural law approach,”⁹⁹ in that it represents a “collapsed eschatology,” that does not “give enough importance to human finitude, human sinfulness, and the fact that the fullness of the reign of God will only come at the end of time.”¹⁰⁰ Stance should embrace all that makes up a full Christian vision of the world, not only as a guide for Christian ethics, but as a position from which to critique other meaning systems and moral interpretations of reality that mediate human experience.¹⁰¹ In addition, the perspective constructed by a stance that does not adequately reflect on sin and human weakness is too narrow to integrate faith and reason, revelation and human experience.

The second step is to develop a historically conscious approach, including: (1) a more personalist basis for understanding society; (2) the uncoupling of the notions of state and society (and the recognition of the limited authority of the state); (3) the acknowledged need for a dialogical and cooperative relationship with the world. Curran sees this as integral to a commitment to social change and an opportunity for moral theology to address the issues that emerge in the “more practical question of strategies for bringing about social change.”¹⁰² These steps reflect the shape that Curran’s theological project takes.

Curran warns against viewing modern Catholic social teaching as a unitary social doctrine, perpetuating “an approach to the social question which is deductive and abstract...insensitive to historical and geographical variations” and is at risk of being applied ideologically.¹⁰³ The reality is much different: these teachings embody a living tradition, one that tries to be sensitive and responsive to new situations and

⁹⁹ Curran, *Dialogue*, 130; Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, 51.

¹⁰⁰ Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, 51.

¹⁰¹ Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, 51-2; *New Perspectives*, 56; see Grecco, *A Theology of Compromise*, 5-11.

¹⁰² Curran, *Dialogue*, 140.

¹⁰³ Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, 34-35.

emerging realities. Newer understandings of the state, property, and human rights have replaced older ones. Even the meaning of the “social question” has undergone considerable change. The social question is now worldwide and solutions are sought in a critical reflection on the problems that face humankind in the light of human experience and of the gospel. Partnership and cooperation are required not only in order to accomplish change, but also to discern the responses that would join the church’s members with the active presence of God in history.¹⁰⁴ As an heir of this living tradition, Curran proposes a theological method that brings the many faceted moral experiences of humankind and the insights of the Catholic faith tradition into a mutually helpful and hermeneutical relationship. The historical and dynamic nature of the church’s teaching (both in its limitations and its originality) provides a sound basis for that tradition to grow and develop.

From this analysis emerge two important claims, which will become reference points for Curran’s understanding of Catholic social ethics. The first is the position of the 1971 Synod of Bishops that action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world are an essential part of the mission of the church. The second is Paul VI’s appeal to the local, regional churches to discern how this mission can be realized in the concrete situations of their lives. Responsive to these concerns, Curran holds that a social teaching must also include the church within its vision. What the church is and how it acts is partially constitutive of its relation to the world. Moreover, a theory does not adequately fulfill the church’s mission. A theologically adequate and humanly realistic understanding of the social mission of the church within a particular cultural context is an essential part of Catholic social ethics.

2. *American and Catholic: Dialogue with Culture.* The relationship of the church to the modern world is perhaps the most critical category to emerge from the Second Vatican Council for the future development of Catholic social ethics. It serves as a touchstone for understanding the social mission of the church and defines the challenge that moral theology faces in developing a moral hermeneutic for integrating the two-fold “lights,” the one of the Gospel and the other of human experience, that allow social situations to become signs of the time, through which the church can discern the call of God. Sometimes framed as a question of the relationship between the Gospel and culture, this dialogue signals the important

¹⁰⁴ See Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio*, n. 54, n.73.

responsibility of moral theology to serve the church in “the continuing function of discerning what is compatible with the Gospel in contemporary culture.”¹⁰⁵ For Curran this implies a dialogue with culture, a critical discourse or dialectic, because “we can expect to find elements that are both supportive of the Gospel message and other elements that are opposed to it.”¹⁰⁶ Christian ethics undertakes “such a discerning process of the contemporary culture...in the light of the scriptural witness, the historical tradition, and the eschatological pull of the future.”¹⁰⁷ Curran examines how different Catholic thinkers have treated the relationship of being Catholic and being American in the history of social ethics in the United States, “with special emphasis on the theological and ethical methodologies employed.”¹⁰⁸

From colonial days, this question has been perhaps the defining question for shaping both American Catholic social ethics as well as the self-consciousness of the church in the United States. Catholics, in this period, were intensely committed to the American vision of a free and open society, even in the face of lingering anti-Catholic feelings. The desire of the Republic to “be free and independent of all foreign influence or jurisdiction” manifested itself in the desire of many Catholics for “an independent national church.”¹⁰⁹

This situation changed with the influx of Catholic immigrants with little or no connection to the settlement period. The church was now an immigrant church and had become the largest single religious denomination in the United States.¹¹⁰ The practical nature of the American-Catholic question, now reflected the suspicion of a predominantly Protestant and nationalist populace vis-à-vis a mostly immigrant minority, putatively tied by religion to a foreign (Roman) authority. This influx of foreigners threatened “the homogeneity of the Anglo-Saxon Protestant culture of the United States” and stirred up a wave of anti-

¹⁰⁵ Charles E. Curran, *Issues in Sexual and Medical Ethics* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1978), 12.

¹⁰⁶ Curran, *Issues*, 26.

¹⁰⁷ Curran, *Issues*, 12.

¹⁰⁸ Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, 71; *American Catholic Social Ethics*, 5.

¹⁰⁹ Jay P. Dolan, *The American Catholic Experience: A History from Colonial Times to the Present* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1985; Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 105-106.

¹¹⁰ Chester Gillis, *Roman Catholicism in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 60-61.

Catholicism that became institutionalized in the political debate.¹¹¹ The church in the United States responded to these suspicions in practical terms, supporting rapid Americanization of immigrants, cooperation with non-Catholics, and aligning itself with the working class in the struggle for economic justice. The deliberate involvement with American life, in which the church in the United States sought to define its place within the mainstream of American society, identifies, for Curran, a major theme that helps interpret Catholic social thought and practice of this period.

On the other hand, Rome feared that American democracy and liberalism would lead to a loss of identity and of faith among American Catholics and questioned whether being American and Catholic were compatible. The Vatican, deeply troubled by the secularization of European governments, wanted the church in the United States to attempt to gain societal status and privilege that Catholicism was losing on the continent. Most of the leaders of the church in America preferred to keep church and state separate.¹¹² A conflict festered until 1899, when Rome issued a strong condemnation of “a constellation of ideas...labeled ‘Americanism’.”¹¹³ Rome’s reaction was a virtual declaration of the incompatibility of Catholicism and American culture.¹¹⁴

Curran’s studies focus on the period that followed the developments described above. Although Curran considers the relationship of Catholicism to American culture as “the most central problematic,”¹¹⁵ the Catholic thinkers he studies are not primarily concerned with the Vatican’s fears of their country’s liberalism or the lingering anti-Catholic bigotry that continued into the 1960s. Their point of view is one of American Catholics in critical reflection on the social, political, and economic realities of the country they call home. Curran’s review of these spokespersons for social justice reveals several different formulations of a “Roman Catholic perspective.” Indirectly, through his own non-systematic critique of their writings, Curran defines his theological project in reference to that tradition. He also defines the issues that, in his opinion, need to be addressed in order to advance the tradition.

¹¹¹ Dolan, 201-202

¹¹² Gillis, 65-66.

¹¹³ Dolan, 315.

¹¹⁴ R. Scott Appleby, *“Church and Age Unite!”: The Modernist Impulse in American Catholicism* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), 243.

¹¹⁵ Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, 100.

The authors Curran reviews and studies are “models or examples of those who wrestled with the issues of social justice, a Christian life style, and an American society.”¹¹⁶ Their ideas and actions explore the relation of the Catholic faith to the economic, political, and social attitudes they found in America. The ethical proposals and the reasoning they follow reveal a consciousness of and thoughtful reflection on the church’s commitment to the cause of social justice and the principles of Catholic economic thought. Several of these writers advance positions that express “a critical posture toward the American economy.”¹¹⁷ All understand social justice as a “constitutive dimension of their own Christian lives and a necessary part of the church.”¹¹⁸ In *American Catholic Social Ethics: Twentieth Century Approaches* Curran offers a detailed historical review of five significant and diverse responses to the question of the relation of faith and culture. In addition to his methodological focus, Curran intends to familiarize contemporary Catholics with the dynamic and pluralistic character of the social ethics tradition of their church. His critical studies provide in inchoate and unsystematic form an insight into the positions that will map out his own approach to social ethics and the questions, which it must address.

In a separate survey of American Catholic contributions to social ethics, John A. Coleman notes that the movement from Christian faith to the ethical evaluation of political, social, and economic realities cannot occur “without the mediation of a developed theology of providence, social ethics, and the nature of the state.”¹¹⁹ These themes can serve as a constructive frame for organizing Curran’s thoughts on the American social ethics tradition. In tracing Curran’s move from personal ethics to social ethics, Coleman’s mediating factors will be used in the following manner. Curran’s discussion of Ryan, Engelen, and Furfey provides especial insight into his construal of social ethics. His treatment of Murray indicates Curran’s understanding of the nature of the state. Finally, his theology of providence and history becomes evident in his critical comments on Douglass.

¹¹⁶ Rembert Weakland, “Introduction,” John J. Mitchell, *Critical Voices in American Catholic Thought* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), vii.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., xiv.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., xv.

¹¹⁹ John Coleman, “Vision and Praxis in American Theology: Orestes Brownson, John A. Ryan, and John Courtney Murray,” *Theological Studies* 37 (1976): 4.

a. Curran's ethical approach: The economy and social ethics. The persons considered in this section, John A. Ryan, William J. Engelen, and Paul Hanly Furfey, were strongly influenced by European Catholic social thought, especially the social encyclicals. All were “extremely critical of what they saw as the intellectual chaos and despair of modern man, the individualism, materialism, and secularism of American society, and the permeation of the church and its members with these values.”¹²⁰ Each attempted to found social reform on the basis of Catholic teaching, with differing emphases: Ryan, through Christian rationalism; Engelen, through an ecclesiological idealism; Furfey, through Christian personalism informed by scripture.

John A. Ryan. John A. Ryan, a professor at the Catholic University of America (1915-1939) and the director of the National Catholic Welfare Conference's Social Action Department (1920-1945) published extensively over a long career.¹²¹ He crafted a social ethical position that, according to Curran, contributed greatly to the development “of the mainstream of reforming or liberal Catholic social thought.”¹²² Ryan held that “his [Aquinas'] formula for the best system of government does not differ essentially from that which is actualized in our American federal and state systems.”¹²³ The philosophical basis for Ryan's affirmation of compatibility between Catholicism and American democracy is found in the two-layer view of human existence, prevalent in the neo-Scholastic construal of natural law. In society (the area theoretically removed from “grace, redemption, and the supernatural”),¹²⁴ Catholics share with others responsibility for the common good. The harmony (mediated by this reading of natural) between “the American political system and Catholic self-understanding”¹²⁵ urged Ryan to work for social justice by means of legislative reform, thus placing a normative value on what “seemed desirable and obtainable

¹²⁰ Carey, 161.

¹²¹ Ryan's published works span a period of over fifty years. Ryan's more influential writings include: *A Living Wage: Its Ethical and Economic Aspects* (New York: Macmillan, 1906); *Distributive Justice: The Right and Wrong of Our Present Distribution of Wealth* (New York: Macmillan, 1916); *Social Reconstruction* (New York: Macmillan, 1920); *Questions of the Day* (Boston: Stratford Co.: 1931); *A Better Economic Order* (New York: Harper Bros., 1935); *The Norm of Morality Defined and Applied to Particular Actions* (Washington, D. C.: National Catholic Welfare Conference, 1952). Ryan is also the co-author and co-editor of several books on Catholicism and social change.

¹²² Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, 77.

¹²³ John A. Ryan, “Assault on Democracy,” *The Catholic World* 128 (1929): 647.

¹²⁴ Curran, *American Catholic Social Ethics*, 85.

¹²⁵ Curran, *American Catholic Social Ethics*, 78.

within a reasonable period of time,”¹²⁶ through the establishment of economic democracy, that is, “by extending democratic ideals to the industrial order.”¹²⁷ Ryan’s ethical judgments thus embody an inductive, empirical measure of the common good and economic democracy.

We cannot reach true and fruitful conclusions by any amount of deductive reasoning from first principles. The general principles are true indeed, but they are practically useless unless they are applied specifically to the actual conditions and relations of industry. Unless we know the facts, we cannot apply the principles.¹²⁸

Because of Ryan’s natural law bias (that law fosters harmonious activity toward the common good), the “do-able” and “measure-able” are integrated into the process of concretizing moral values and obligations, such as distributive justice, the principles of expediency and subsidiarity. He describes the common good in the practical language of economic democracy and social justice. This approach makes him a realist, who “never accepts what he terms historical and contemporary capitalism such as existed in the United States in the 1930s...[and who] makes a special effort to show that the Catholic church does not support capitalism and the status quo in the United States.”¹²⁹

Curran, however, finds fault with Ryan’s ethical stance, for failing to integrate the natural with the supernatural, include the reality of sin in its theory, join scripture and liturgy with social ethics, go more deeply into the need for personal reform, and recognize the deeper incompatibilities between American culture and Catholicism.¹³⁰ Ryan’s two-tiered approach leaves out of his theoretical reflection the impact of grace, redemption, and sin on human political, social, and economic reality. As a result, Curran says, the importance of personal change of heart for social reform is underemphasized.¹³¹

Curran’s critique of Ryan is better understood as an argument that Christian social ethics must have a theological quality that goes beyond the merely natural and demonstrates a clear “connection between the kingdom of God and the work for social justice.”¹³² Moral theology ought not separate the

¹²⁶ Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, 77.

¹²⁷ Curran, *American Catholic Social Ethics*, 28.

¹²⁸ John A. Ryan, *Questions of the Day*, 222.

¹²⁹ Curran, *American Catholic Social Ethics*, 62.

¹³⁰ Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, 82.

¹³¹ Curran, *American Catholic Social Ethics*, 85.

¹³² Curran, *American Catholic Social Ethics*, 85.

kingdom from the “economic and political aspects of human existence.”¹³³ Curran acknowledges Ryan’s concern that no social order can be stable without a considerable change of heart and ideals,¹³⁴ but criticizes Ryan for leaving out explicit consideration of sin from this discussion.¹³⁵

Curran values Ryan’s ability to integrate empirical, inductive methodology with generalized natural law obligations. The normative value of economic data and scientific understanding in determining social morality, however, lacked the standing it deserved in Ryan’s social ethics because of his natural law methodology. Moreover, this approach limits the social mission of the church to a teaching role.¹³⁶ However, because of the natural-supernatural split in natural law thinking, particular strategies for bringing about the common good lie outside the competence of the church. Ryan’s view that the proper mission of the church “is not to realize the kingdom of God on earth, but to save individual souls”¹³⁷ limits social action to the secular activity of the church’s laity, who follow the teachings of the church under the direction of their priest. The church teaches the moral principles that devolve from natural law. It may even declare certain methods of social organization (such as socialism) to be against natural law.

Curran’s study of Ryan intends to demonstrate the importance of integrating faith and reason in moral method. His criticism of Ryan’s adherence to a two-tier theory of morality, however, reduces to a question of methodology, what in fact reflected a strategy of political and social communication. Ryan was sensitive to the anti-Catholic feelings in the United States and guarded against the enthusiasm of the social-gospel movement. His integrative work is evident in the arena of practice and his appeal to the public conscience deliberately seeks to avoid religious language and to appeal rather to secular values people

¹³³ Curran, *American Catholic Social Ethics*, 86.

¹³⁴ “Neither the moderate programs advocated in this paper, nor any other program of betterment or reconstruction will prove reasonably effective without a reform in the spirit of both labor and capital.” John A. Ryan, *The Bishops’ Program of Social Reconstruction*, in *American Catholic Thought on Social Questions*, ed. Aaron Abell (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1968), 347-48.

¹³⁵ I would point out, however, that in light of Ryan’s intentions and, in particular, of his acceptance of the coercive power of the state, it could be argued that his gradualism, pragmatism, and insistence on empirically testing the meaning of ideal concepts demonstrate a realistic awareness of sin and imperfection in social reality. This is evident in his approach to social reform through legislation. See John A. Ryan, “A Program of Social Reform by Legislation,” (two part article), *The Catholic World*, 89 (1909): 432-444; 608-614.

¹³⁶ Curran, *American Catholic Social Ethics*, 65.

¹³⁷ Curran, *American Catholic Social Ethics*, 67.

already believed in.¹³⁸ In the concrete challenge of finding a middle position in the social reform debate going on in his time (between rugged individualism and socialism), Ryan joins faith and reason by emulating Leo XIII, who (in Ryan's view) proceeded "to consider comprehensively the facts of present day industry and to apply the traditional principles specifically to these facts."¹³⁹ Ryan's empirical determination of the obliging implications of natural law arrives at mediating concepts that intend to bring faith and praxis together in a way that alters the contents of both. Curran's evaluation may overstate the weakness of Ryan's approach. In Ryan's hands, the natural law method does not weaken his ethical arguments.

William J. Engelen. The German-American Central *Verein* was a national umbrella organization for German Catholic benevolent associations across the United States and the "largest group of American Catholics involved as such in social reform in the first part of the twentieth century."¹⁴⁰ Although the Central *Verein* had various spokespersons and was not a totally monolithic organization, Curran focuses on the views of William J. Engelen, long time writer for the *Verein's* journal, *Central-Blatt and Social Justice*. Ryan represented the mainstream of Catholic opinion in regard to the relation of church and state, Engelen leaned toward a separatist opinion.

Engelen's approach to social ethics stressed the value and normative function of natural law. However, strong theological and cultural biases prevented him and the *Verein* from finding any compatibility between the culture of the United States and Catholic faith. The *Verein* opposed rapid Americanization of immigrants and proposed organizing the church hierarchy along ethnic lines. It strove to maintain connections with and the language and customs of the homeland, which was also a source of the *Verein's* suspicion of liberalism and Protestantism, based on the anti-religious character of European liberalism and their abrasive experiences with German Protestantism.

Although Engelen acknowledges the reality of sin, sin does not alter his understanding of the precepts of natural law. Sin affects our ability to know and observe the natural law, but not natural law

¹³⁸ Richard R. Gaillardetz, "John A. Ryan: An Early Revisionist?" *Journal of Religious Ethics* 18 (Fall, 1990): 116.

¹³⁹ John A. Ryan, *Questions of the Day*, 223.

¹⁴⁰ Curran, *American Catholic Social Ethics*, 92.

itself. The most reliable source of natural law, then, is the supreme authority of the church.¹⁴¹ Christ is thus viewed as extrinsic to natural law, enabling knowledge and observance of its precepts through “grace or a change of heart.”¹⁴² As a result, Engelen regards the community of faith as the ideal for practicing natural law social morality and the leadership of the Catholic Church as necessary for social reconstruction. Human fulfillment comes through participation in a corporatist or organic society, that is, one “which call[s] for a hierarchical ordering of all elements in society in which the state respect[s] the lesser social groups and [does] not usurp their functions.”¹⁴³

Curran concedes that the *Verein's* “conservatism serves precisely as the basis for a strong critique of the existing economic system in the United States,”¹⁴⁴ but objects that the radical reforms proposed by Engelen stood little chance of success and “said little or nothing...about how to effectuate their program [of solidarism] in practice.”¹⁴⁵ Curran finds Engelen’s methodology abstract and ahistorical, glorifying “a romantic picture of the Middle ages”¹⁴⁶-- a utopia, leaving little room for positive ethical evaluation of the necessary, instrumental steps toward the radical social reconstruction they espoused--as a normative ideal of order and harmony.¹⁴⁷ Curran again points out the inadequacy of an ethical stance that fails “to incorporate the realities of redemption and sin into” its vision.¹⁴⁸ This stance also predisposes Engelen’s ethics toward separatism.

Curran’s review attributes the *Verein's* position primarily to the methodology employed and does pay sufficient attention to the ecclesiology operative in Engelen’s thinking. Pragmatically, the view of the Roman Catholic church as potentially the most powerful social agent for achieving societal reform sees no gain in compromising with capitalist interests or the materialist, competitive, and selfish ethos thought to be prevalent in the United States. Both church and society are understood as organic communities. For the

¹⁴¹ Curran, *American Catholic Social Ethics*, 100-03.

¹⁴² Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, 126.

¹⁴³ Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, 84.

¹⁴⁴ Curran, *American Catholic Social Ethics*, 125.

¹⁴⁵ Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, 86.

¹⁴⁶ Curran, *American Catholic Social Ethics*, 103-07.

¹⁴⁷ Curran, *American Catholic Social Ethics*, 86; see also 112-13, where Curran points out that initially Engelen accepted a gradualist approach to economic reform, but “as his perspective became more utopian”, his calls for change became more radical and less able to deal with the “tensions that arise between the ideal and present reality.”

¹⁴⁸ Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, 128.

church to embody the principles of its own social teachings in Catholic corporate structures was seen, not as a separation from society, but as an opportunity to model for all to see the universal principles of the natural law social ethics. The ecclesial and communitarian dimension of the German-American approach points to an understanding of the church not only as the privileged source of truth in the world, but as a society that models the natural harmony to which humankind is called. Curran does not deal with this ecclesial dimension of German-American position.

Although the methodology may be ahistorical, the impetus for the commitment of Engelen and the *Verein* is consciously located in the historical realities of American culture. Their focus on the social reform of American society is evident in Peter Dietz's (an associate of the Central *Verein*) description of the *Verein* member: "As a public-minded, patriotic citizen of a country that he dearly loves, he is interested in the public affairs of his country. It becomes his part to participate in the making and administration of the law."¹⁴⁹ This German American association sought social reform on the basis of Catholic social principles, combining change of heart and structural change by establishing "social reforms on the basis of Catholic corporate structures. Using the principle of subsidiarity, the Verein emphasized the organic nature of the community, especially the Catholic corporate communities, rather than the state as the primary basis of social reform."¹⁵⁰ Curran's study does not expose clearly enough this commitment to action for social change. Nevertheless, Curran is persuasive in his argument that Engelen's theologizing of natural law, in terms of the necessity of faith and grace for its accessibility and observance, creates a new dualism. This deontological application of natural law comes dangerously close to ideology and contributes to a *de facto* sectarianism. In the end, it becomes a powerful argument against the usefulness of such an approach for dialogue and cooperation with the world.

Paul Hanly Furfey. Paul Hanly Furfey was a Catholic priest and a life-long professor of sociology at the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C. He is perhaps best known for his unequivocal condemnation of capitalism and, by extension, the American ethos.¹⁵¹ Furfey merits study, in Curran's

¹⁴⁹ Quoted in Aaron Abell, ed. *American Catholic Thought on Social Questions* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1968), 254.

¹⁵⁰ Patrick Carey, *American Catholic Religious Thought* (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 45.

¹⁵¹ John Hanly Furfey, *Fire on the Earth* (New York: Macmillan, 1936), 119.

opinion, because he offers a “systematic and theoretical”¹⁵² exposition of the ethical and theological thinking behind the radical ethical approach of Christian personalism, especially as exemplified in the Catholic Worker Movement.¹⁵³

Furfey’s interest in social ethics stems from his work as a sociologist and his awareness of economic inequalities, racial discrimination, and the existence of a sub-culture of poverty in the United States. He views the economic, industrial, political and social system of the United States as diametrically opposed to the Gospel and incompatible with natural law based Catholic social teachings. Natural law, according to Furfey, will not be known through a positivist approach to knowledge nor will there be sufficient motivation to observe God’s plan in a “positivistic society, which... believes in success as its ideal”¹⁵⁴ and refuses God’s dominion over creation. The success ideal “by its power of controlling society...tends to direct the whole trend of modern civilization towards the same mass culture.”¹⁵⁵ Furfey’s critique of the positivist, progressivist paradigm of society is, in substance, a rejection of a materialist interpretation of life(stance), of a utilitarian approach to ethics (model), and of competitiveness as a basis for cooperation.¹⁵⁶ The success ideal betrays an error in the intellectual order, a mistake about human value itself.¹⁵⁷ Furfey, in language colorful and filled with biblical imagery, concludes that American society is part of a cosmic and social reality he describes as the kingdom or body of Satan (as opposed to the kingdom of God or Body of Christ).¹⁵⁸

Furfey proposes a social theory that uses empirical methods to observe what is happening, but interprets experience through a Christian perspective that recognizes the transcendent dimension of life and bases social reform on the communal nature of human being.¹⁵⁹ The only way to overcome social evil is to

¹⁵² Curran, *American Catholic Social Ethics*, 133.

¹⁵³ Curran, *American Catholic Social Ethics*, 130-171.

¹⁵⁴ Curran, *American Catholic Social Ethics*, 135; Paul Hanly Furfey, *Three Theories of Society* (New York: Macmillan, 1937), 30.

¹⁵⁵ Paul Hanly Furfey, *Three Theories*, 41.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 54.

¹⁵⁸ Paul Hanly Furfey, *Fire on the Earth*, 60-78.

¹⁵⁹ Mitchell, 140.

build society based on faith, a “pistic society.”¹⁶⁰ The means of social change are therefore supernatural, because the transforming power of grace and a gospel inspired life-style are necessary for rising above the positivistic, success-oriented ethos of capitalism. Participation in the life of faith, worship, and community indicate Furfey’s reliance on faith “to reveal the mystery of man’s redemption and provide insight into the meaning of social life.”¹⁶¹

In the face of continuing evidence of injustice and indifference in society¹⁶² (the “morality gap” between American ethos and Catholic teaching), Furfey rejects the mainstream of social “respectability,” opting for non-participation in its institutions, and witness bearing. Non-participation, then, refers to “the duty of separating oneself from the *mores* of a worldly society” (italics mine) intellectually and by one’s conduct, in order to abolish the evils caused by the false sense of values and assumptions about life that underlie the social values and practices that are destructive of human dignity.¹⁶³

The flaw in Furfey’s method lies, according to Curran, in moving from faith statements and the scriptures directly to their application, as absolute injunctions, to contemporary life. The obligations that Furfey derives from his deontological, scriptural literalism,¹⁶⁴ lack evidence of any “depth of theoretical development” or “penetrating or subtle reasoning.”¹⁶⁵ Furfey’s radical theory of Christian personalism does not offer a strategy for social change,¹⁶⁶ because it creates a dualism, which makes it impossible to answer the question “How is redemption going to occur so that such sin can be converted into grace?” There is no basis for dialogue with society in Furfey’s approach, which underplays the importance of institutional and structural change. Curran’s view is that religious morality requires mediation and middle steps that concretely identify what ethically good structures and institutions might look like.¹⁶⁷ Furfey’s “grace-sin

¹⁶⁰ Furfey describes the pistic society as “a society characterized by its members’ dominant common purpose of attaining socially their ultimate supernatural end; a society founded upon supernatural faith.” *Three Theories*, appendix.

¹⁶¹ Mitchell, 140.

¹⁶² Paul Hanly Furfey, *The Morality Gap* (New York: Macmillan, 1968), 68.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 116-19.

¹⁶⁴ Furfey, *Three Theories*, 3-10. Furfey describes his approach not as deontological but as teleological. Although success lies with God, the purpose of ethical reflection is to achieve a goal, the kind of humanity and society that brings us into union with God.

¹⁶⁵ Curran, *American Catholic Social Ethics*, 167.

¹⁶⁶ Curran, *American Catholic Social Ethics*, 145, 171; see Mitchell, 147-150.

¹⁶⁷ Curran, *American Catholic Social Ethics*, 148.

dichotomy explaining present realities does not recognize the implications of this mediation.”¹⁶⁸ It is not Furfey’s appeal to the scriptures that Curran finds problematic, but the fallacious over-simplifications that result from applying scripture deontologically, without other ethical criteria. Curran regrets that Furfey never put into practice his proposed ethical method, involving the interaction of theology and sociology. This approach, Curran believes, could have resulted in “new theological conclusion[s], which...[are] unattainable either by revelation alone or by faith alone.”¹⁶⁹

Curran makes several important comments on Furfey’s approach. However, Curran’s description of Furfey as a scriptural fundamentalist seems over done, because Furfey does not simply “apply” biblical norms to society; he offers them as an alternate *way of thinking* about society. Neither is Furfey’s language as categorical as Curran would make it.¹⁷⁰ Furfey is a realist about the church, aware of the process of both decline and progress in the church. He argues that one’s social-economic position can enter into and shape one’s perspective, resulting in a Catholic conformism. Curran’s final judgment of Furfey is probably more realistic and fair: “Furfey gives as radical an interpretation of social ethics as possible on the basis of traditionally accepted Catholic theology and ecclesiology.”¹⁷¹

Implications for social ethical method. Curran notes that all three thinkers accept the essentialist natural law approach, however, they differ as to how it can be known and followed. Curran’s endorsement of Ryan’s approach indicates his preference for a natural law theory that recognizes and cooperates with moral action based on natural or humanistic thinking and motivation. Curran’s agreement with Ryan’s politically

¹⁶⁸ Curran, *American Catholic Social Ethics*, 168-69.

¹⁶⁹ Curran, *American Catholic Social Ethics*, 161. Curran stresses the value of Furfey’s the practical methodology as a model for making social ethic decisions. The proposed model follows a syllogistic form in which divine revelation would supply the major and sociology the minor of the argument. This approach, however, would contradict Curran’s rejection of the deontological, deductive approach.

¹⁷⁰ Furfey was less duty oriented and more intent on creating a theological vision that could be used to interpret the world and serve as a basis for developing and structuring a new economic and social order. He held that the church should not separate itself in the sense of becoming apolitical and asocial, thus ignoring the economic plight of many who are oppressed and forgotten. God’s truth is to inform human rationality and creativity and guide political, social, and economic engagement. God’s truth is not deontologically understood as a command to be obeyed, but as an approach to understanding reality. Furfey does not speak of specific moral directives, when he refers to God’s truth, but to a perspective informed by faith. Thus, Furfey says: “When God reveals a truth to man, this truth often is one otherwise unattainable by the human mind. Divine faith is thus a wholly new approach to reality.” Furfey, *Three Theories*, 160.

¹⁷¹ Paul Hanly Furfey, *The Mystery of Iniquity* (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Co.: 1944), 31.

¹⁷¹ Curran, *American Catholic Social Ethics*, 162.

gradual construal of what is obligatory differs sharply from the more radical and total models of a just society promoted by Engelen and Furfey.

Curran attributes Ryan's belief that church and society are compatible, as well as the others' certainty of incompatibility to the natural law construal typical at the time of their writing. Ryan dealt with the dualistic aspect of the natural law by affirming that in matters that pertain to all, Catholics are bound by the same obligations as everyone else. Furfey and Engelen deal with the same dualism by insisting that the natural must be redeemed by God and only explicit entry into that salvation provides one with the means of knowing and observing the truly natural order.

Central to this discussion of church-society relationships is the understanding of church. In my view, the reality referred to by "church" needs to be explored in more depth in order to understand the social ethics being proposed by each writer. I submit that the greatest differences between these men have to do not so much with their interpretation of natural law, as with their understanding of the church and its relation to their natural law frameworks. This is a point that remains moot in Curran's assessment, yet it is critical, I believe, to a correct evaluation of what they were saying.

All three authors see the church as the means of salvation. For Ryan, the church has no inherent interest in politics or economics but rather in saving souls. How Catholics treat one another in society is largely a matter of general morality. Engelen views the church as an ecclesiastical hierarchy, with access to divine truth. Social reform is linked to acceptance of the church's authority—an act that can be carried out only in faith. Furfey posits a greater continuity between the church and the world (even anticipating Vatican II in grasping the church as sacrament of the world) and construes social reform as inseparable from accepting God's truth about human life and the world and as the extension of the human good that Christ proclaimed and exemplified in his life.¹⁷²

Curran supports a more humanistic understanding of the church. His position that: "No one relying on the Catholic tradition can theologically propose a radical incompatibility between this world and the kingdom of God,"¹⁷³ indicates the importance he lays on human experience as the medium of Christian

¹⁷² See Furfey, *Three Theories*, 119.

¹⁷³ Curran, *American Catholic Social Ethics*, 159.

morality and on understanding the church as called to share the life of the world. The relationship between church and world, social change and the kingdom contains continuities and discontinuities, but this imperfect world is the only arena of the saving work of God—thus Curran’s great emphasis on mediation. Curran’s view of social ethics might be fairly summarized as follows: an ethical methodology that can provide adequate guidance for understanding the Christian vocation in the world, based in human experience rationally and historically understood. In this view, the church and the Christian ethicist are seen as religiously interpreting and modeling, in word and action, the secular reality of human society.

b. The nature of the state: John Courtney Murray. Curran regards John Courtney Murray as having done more to resolve the issue of the relation between Catholicism and the American political ethos than any other American Catholic theologian. Murray did not view separation of church and state, as established in the American Constitution, as a threat to the church, but a model of church-state relations, fully in accord with natural law.¹⁷⁴ Indeed, Catholics are not only loyal citizens, but the Catholic natural law theory defends and guarantees the basic rights and principles of the American political system.¹⁷⁵ Murray reached this conclusion using a historically conscious hermeneutic for understanding both natural law and the state.

Natural law has changing historical expressions reflective of their social context and the historical forces at work at the time, which, however, are “structured by absolute and unalterable first principles...[and do] not alter the basic structure of human nature nor affect basic human destiny and experience.”¹⁷⁶ Making use of a historical and inductive approach, Murray points out: “The question, what is religious freedom, is not to be answered a priori or in the abstract. The fact is that religious freedom is an aspect of contemporary historical experience.”¹⁷⁷ The state is also a *de facto* reality, which exists as limited constitutional government. It may not be identified with the church or society and, as a result, exercises only limited powers in relation to public order, rather than the common good.¹⁷⁸ Within this framework,

¹⁷⁴ John Courtney Murray, *We Hold These Truths: Catholic Reflections on the American Proposition* (New York: Sheed and Ward: 1960), 27-28.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 30.

¹⁷⁶ Curran, *American Catholic Social Ethics*, 182.

¹⁷⁷ John Courtney Murray, “The Problem of Religious Freedom,” in *Religious Liberty: Catholic Struggles with Pluralism*, ed. J. Leon Hooper (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox Press: 1993), 140.

¹⁷⁸ Murray, “The Problem of Religious Freedom,” 144-45.

Murray construes religious liberty as immunity from the coercive power of the state, arguing inductively from historical facticity. Just as critical to Murray's approach, however, is the

idea that government has a moral basis; that the universal moral law is the foundation of society; that the legal order of society—that is, the state—is subject to judgment by law that is not statistical but inherent in the nature of man; that the eternal reasons is God the ultimate origin of law.¹⁷⁹

Thus, government is understood as a historical, voluntary reality (government of, by, and for the people) and ahistorical moral reality. Although Murray does not deal with natural law in a strict deontological fashion, natural law remains a permanent moral norm that guides the harmony that is required for a good society.

Despite Curran's overall positive evaluation of Murray, Curran challenges his understanding of natural law. He rejects Murray's call for a metaphysical or philosophical consensus to rekindle the American proposition and serve as the basis for a "common ground morality."¹⁸⁰ Historical thinking, Curran argues, must take into consideration not only the religious, but also the philosophical pluralism that exists in the United States.¹⁸¹ Nevertheless, Curran regards Murray's understanding of the role of the state to be overly restricted by the criterion of public order. In Curran's view "the state must have a greater role to play in economic affairs, even while it adheres to the principle of subsidiarity."¹⁸² Curran discards the relationship of state to God, which served as the basis for the older Catholic desideratum of a church-state union, in favor of an approach that sees the ethical responsibility for society in the will of the citizens.

According to Curran, Murray works out of a two-layered model of reality: the natural and supernatural orders.¹⁸³ This dualism ignores the theological insight that "the natural as such and as distinguished from the supernatural order has never historically existed."¹⁸⁴ The presence and impact of grace, redemption, and sin, and of the mystery of Christ in the world and history cannot be integrated methodologically into ethical reflection on the state in Murray's approach. This also impacts on how one regards the social mission of the church. Since natural morality disposes one for the supernatural life of

¹⁷⁹ Murray, *We Hold These Truths*, 42.

¹⁸⁰ Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, 99.

¹⁸¹ Curran, *American Catholic Social Ethics*, 191.

¹⁸² Curran, *American Catholic Social Ethics*, 232.

¹⁸³ Curran, *American Catholic Social Ethics*, 226-30.

¹⁸⁴ Curran, *American Catholic Social Ethics*, 224.

grace, the gospel is not directly related to the transformation of the temporal order.¹⁸⁵ The church urges observance of natural law and contributes to the “spiritualization of the temporal order of society”:¹⁸⁶ a pre-evangelization (*praeparatio evangelica*). Murray’s natural law approach leaves little room for discussion of the change of heart and so fails to develop a “a more critical stance vis-à-vis the existing American realities,” especially those that include the presence and impact of power politics, conflictual strategies, and the selfish motives behind them.¹⁸⁷ In brief, Curran considers Murray’s approach to be lacking the language and perspective necessary for ethics to develop a conscious awareness of and response to the presence of God in history.

Implications for method: an emergent church. Curran’s evaluation of Murray, although it ignores later developments in Murray’s thought,¹⁸⁸ reveals some of the standards Curran sets for moral theology. Making the understanding of natural law more historically conscious and based on the intersubjectivity, freedom, and creativity of personhood is not enough. Moral theology must also be concerned with the presence of God in history and with understanding the state as a positive factor in bringing about the kingdom of God.

The church, while not exclusively the presence of God in history, sees itself as a sacrament of that divine activity. Curran’s commitment to integrating the Christian mysteries in his revised approach to natural law includes, of necessity, the ecclesial dimension of Catholic liturgy, community, social action, and learning-teaching- dialogue (*leiturgia, koinonia, diakonia, or didache*) and their influence on norms and decision-making. Although Curran finds the integrated Catholicism of the Central Verein, the supernatural means of Furfey’s “pistic” sociology, and the Christian personalism of the Catholic Worker

¹⁸⁵ Curran, *American Catholic Social Ethics*, 225.

¹⁸⁶ Curran, *American Catholic Social Ethics*, 188.

¹⁸⁷ Curran, *American Catholic Social Ethics*, 231.

¹⁸⁸ J. Leon Hooper provides a detailed analysis of the theological development of Murray’s political and social philosophy away from the purely natural law categories that had dominated much of his earlier writings. Later essays reveal a turn toward “God’s present historical action in the church and also in general society.” (197) It should be noted that Murray’s move did not shift the grounding of norms away from human reason and critical reflection on historical reality, but related moral values to the presence and activity of God in history. Hooper argues that the cognitional theories of Bernard Lonergan provided the method and tools Murray required for properly understanding and articulating the relationship of social and political life to the reality of God in the world. J. Leon Hooper, *The Ethics of Discourse: The Social Philosophy of John Courtney Murray* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1986), 195-225.

movement too separatist, he offers no elaborated alternative to Murray's two-tiered understanding of church and state.

A theologically explicit approach to natural law will have to facilitate the articulation and formation of the social self-consciousness of the church, as a communion of believing subjects, the community of shared meanings and values, the historical locus of Catholic-Christian theology. Serious reflection on and imaginative response to what it means to be a socially responsible church requires a more empirically based and theologically enlightened discussion of the church than Curran proposes. The church makes moral decisions as a living and developing faith community. Relationality-responsibility could be an effective model for validating Roman Catholic moral decisions. Curran, however, does not address this concern, leaving the question of the relationship of church and the world without an adequate ecclesiology.

c. A Theology of providence: social action in history. Perhaps no factor in moral theology is more significant than the theologian's understanding of the relationship of history and eschatology. Are Christians sustained only by past memories, which, as they fade, leave them progressively abandoned to the resources of their own reason and prudence? Are they upheld solely by a future hope of a kingdom beyond time, urging them to remain uncontaminated by the world? The implication of the first claim is that ethical reflection will be rooted more and more in human experience, as the church becomes historically more distant from the historical reality of Christ and the experience of the first community. The second scenario leaves less room for ethical reflection and focuses instead on strategies for preserving intact a historical expression of faithful morality until such time as the "master returns." Christian ethics must be in a position to give an account of history, because, as Stanley Hauerwas points out, the ethicist's "view of history determines how [one] understands [one's] role as ethicist and theologian."¹⁸⁹

James W. Douglass. In the 1960s a new form of social consciousness appeared in the church in the United States: social activism. The Catholic Peace Movement as represented by the writings of James W. Douglass is one example of this trend. The other, embracing a myriad of causes, is the community organization movement, most frequently associated with the name of Saul D. Alinsky.

¹⁸⁹ Stanley M. Hauerwas, *Wilderness Wanderings: Probing Twentieth-Century Theology and Philosophy* (Boulder, Co.: Westview Press, 1997), 71.

Douglass does not propose a theory of natural law. His understanding of history as eschatological is, instead, the medium for discerning Christian social action. A severe critic of Catholicism's "accommodation to the prevailing ethos and culture,"¹⁹⁰ Douglass is convinced that the truth revealed by Christ is obscured by accepting the American ethos. Jesus was a non-violent revolutionary, who overcame the evil and injustices in the world through suffering and redemptive love. Jesus' life reflects a rationality or logic that allows one to see life radically fulfilled in self-emptying love and reliance on the power of God's truth and love.¹⁹¹

Douglass' conviction that in the presence of nuclear weapons life is permanently threatened, grounds the obligation to follow the teaching of Jesus, who, in a world that was marked by apocalyptic expectation, responded with the Sermon on the Mount and the witness of suffering love.¹⁹² But he also sees history as the eschatological outpouring of the Spirit's gifts enabling all persons, through personal transformation, to engage in a politics "of nonviolent resistance as a form of protest and dissent," of civil disobedience, and of "the radical response which is required in this end-time."¹⁹³ It is not a collapsed eschatology that expects easy conversion or transformation of the world nor does it flee from the world. In this approach, the relationship of the Christian community to the state is that of "a sign of contradiction."¹⁹⁴ "The Christian lives his permanent revolution toward the state—demanding always that its authorities always take a step further toward the cross...[although] he will never expect the government authorities to embrace the cross."¹⁹⁵ Moreover, non-violence is not an exclusively Catholic or Christian option. By entering into the transformative process of renouncing violence and force, "every living person" can become part of the eschatological, redeeming love of God in Jesus.

The practice of politics is essential to the Catholic ethical response to the sinfulness of society. Since society, as it is, is radically incapable of meeting the needs of the human family today, Christian politics is also revolutionary.

¹⁹⁰ Curran, *American Catholic Social Ethics*, 246.

¹⁹¹ James W. Douglass, *The Non-violent Cross: A Theory of Revolution and Peace* (New York: Macmillan, 1968), 71.

¹⁹² Curran, *American Catholic Social Ethics*, 245.

¹⁹³ Curran, *American Catholic Social Ethics*, 264-68.

¹⁹⁴ Curran, *American Catholic Social Ethics*, 270.

¹⁹⁵ Douglass, *The Non-Violent Cross*, 212-13.

Revolution means transformation because man deformed by such structures and institutions [of society today] must pass into the fire of truth consuming his very nature as it has been built up...and thus in the heat of suffering to take on the new and more deeply human forms of non-violent power and total community.¹⁹⁶

Curran's criticism of Douglass begins with what he regards as Douglass' simplistic use of scripture and the reduction of eschatology to apocalypticism. Curran describes this as a two-poled monism: the one pole is suffering love as the fundamental ethical value and the other is non-violence as the single test case for Christian ethics.¹⁹⁷ While Curran recognizes the importance for social ethics of Catholic radicalism's incorporation of scriptural and theological thinking into ethical methodology and the necessity of looking for the "counter-cultural position" inherent in Christian beliefs, he disagrees with Douglass' theological and ethical presuppositions, which are "too one-sided and ignore the complexity which I [Curran] think belongs to these aspects."¹⁹⁸

In Curran's assessment, Douglass interprets social reality and the Christian response exclusively in terms of a paradoxical theology of the cross. Although Curran concedes "an honored place for those who live out a personal vocation to non-violent resistance," he insists that the "church must be broader than a community of suffering and resisting love."¹⁹⁹ Curran's judgment of Furfey and the Catholic Worker Movement also applies here: "Their insistence on a social ethic based on eschatology and the scriptures tends to result in fundamentalistic and overly simplistic solutions."²⁰⁰

Curran's understanding of life in the time between Christ's comings, urges him to keep expectations of the kingdom within practical limits and to avoid black and white dualism. How biblical teachings and norms are used (deontologically), how the present moment is construed (apocalyptically), and how faith and reason, church and society are considered (confrontationally) are at odds with Curran's understanding of the universality of the church and his desire for harmony between church and society. The desired harmony or balance that Curran proposes "seems to abandon his principles of complexity and tension in social ethics...[reducing] eschatology to considerations of discontinuity/continuity of heaven and

¹⁹⁶ Douglass, *The Non-Violent Cross*, 22.

¹⁹⁷ Curran, *American Catholic Social Ethics*, 272.

¹⁹⁸ Curran, *American Catholic Social Ethics*, 275.

¹⁹⁹ Curran, *American Catholic Social Ethics*, 282.

²⁰⁰ Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, 89.

earth.”²⁰¹ The eschatological quality of history, the reality of “resurrection destiny” as historically impacting on the here and now is replaced by a preference to avoid conflictual and radical readings of history.

Saul D. Alinsky. For Curran, the story told in *American Catholic Social Ethics* remains incomplete, because it ignores “something new and distinctive in the practical approach to social justice in North American Catholicism”:²⁰² the growing involvement of Roman Catholics in the community organization movement of Saul D. Alinsky. Alinsky’s theory and strategy of community organization have become, in Curran’s judgment, “the most distinctive practical approach taken to social justice by the Catholic church in the United States.”²⁰³

Community organization is not primarily about structural change, but raising the consciousness of and empowering people within a democratic system that is “truly a warfare.”²⁰⁴ Curran notes that Alinsky includes conflict and power in his analysis and strategies “to enable the powerless and the have-nots to participate in determining their lives,”²⁰⁵ in a partisan approach that begins with the experience of powerlessness and exclusion and works toward changing unequal societal relationships. Curran adds that realistically “there is no other place to start.”²⁰⁶

This partisan view includes a commitment to the common good,²⁰⁷ identified with the effective functioning of democracy. This necessarily includes conflict, because in a democracy there is always uneven distribution of power, which tends to foster the interests of some against others.²⁰⁸ Conflict is not the essence of democracy, but an on-going strategy for maintaining and fairly distributing the values of democracy, which are very similar to “the values proposed by the Judeo-Christian tradition.”²⁰⁹ Neither

²⁰¹ Grecco, *A Theology of Compromise*, 92-93.

²⁰² Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, 147.

²⁰³ Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, 148. Alinsky’s two most influential and well-known works are *Reveille for Radicals* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946; New York, Vintage Press, 1969) and *Rules for Radicals: A Practical Primer for Realistic Radicals* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972)

²⁰⁴ Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, 153.

²⁰⁵ Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, 152.

²⁰⁶ Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, 160.

²⁰⁷ Alinsky, *Rules*, 53-59. Elsewhere, Alinsky describes a radical as a person committed to human service and the common good. *Reveille*, 23.

²⁰⁸ Alinsky, *Reveille*, 194.

²⁰⁹ See Alinsky, *Reveille*, 1-23.

conflict nor power is absolute.²¹⁰ Realism prevails in Alinsky's ethics of gradual and limited progress, cooperation, and compromise and reflects the dialectic process and rhythm of "democratic society [which] is truly an ongoing conflict interrupted periodically by compromises."²¹¹ Because Alinsky does not speak of community organization in ethical or religious terms, Curran attempts to link his social pragmatism with moral theological reasoning. "There can be no doubt that Alinsky's people's organizations fit under what [Jacques] Maritain calls the third way [pressure groups that act on the government and state] through which people control government...Alinsky's thinking is totally in accord with that of the Catholic tradition."²¹²

In his enthusiasm for Alinsky, Curran reveals his predilection for natural law and common ground approaches, which can be seen in the natural law language Curran employs. "Catholic acceptance of Alinsky-style community organization involves a commitment to working with others for the common good."²¹³ Traditional Catholic social teaching seeks the advancement of the individual within a movement toward the attainment of the common good, because "the dignity of the individual... [is tied to] the social nature of the person."²¹⁴ Further, in seeking to harmonize the love of God, neighbor, and self, in concrete social structures, the church has recourse to the principle of subsidiarity or local control, similar to the goal of community organizations. Alinsky's stress on freedom, equality and participation of citizens in social life echoes the support for these values in recent papal teachings. Curran sees natural law teaching on the limited end of the common good and the distinction between state and society contained in Alinsky's notion of self-interest. He concludes that "by appealing both to the common good and self-interest Saul Alinsky shows himself to be in line with the traditional catholic understanding...Political action based on self-interest properly understood is morally good and politics and power cannot be separated."²¹⁵ The common good is the goal of society, which redounds to all individuals who are part of the social whole.

²¹⁰ Alinsky, *Rules*, 122-23.

²¹¹ Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, 163.

²¹² Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, 170.

²¹³ Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, 164.

²¹⁴ Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, 167.

²¹⁵ Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, 164-65.

Implications for method: values and eschatology. Although Alinsky expresses an apocalyptic view of American democracy,²¹⁶ Curran overlooks the similarities between Alinsky's radical ethic and Douglass'. The dualism implicit in Alinsky's polarizing and oppositional tactics and the confrontational witness-bearing of James Douglass are not so different from each other as to easily explain Curran's preference for Alinsky. Alinsky's comments on the pursuit of democratic happiness²¹⁷ could be paraphrased to describe Douglass' ethical disposition: "The pursuit of the kingdom is never-ending and the kingdom lies in the pursuit."

Neither Alinsky nor Douglass present radical action in terms of an unattainable future, but as an attempt to regain democracy's or Christianity's roots through confrontation with the powers that violate basic ethical values.²¹⁸ Douglass does this through symbolic acts of non-violent resistance; Alinsky follows the route of confronting those destructive forces that harass the citizen. There is no mention by Curran of Alinsky's call for a universal ethics to serve as a warrant for social activism or his belief that "the multiple ethical systems and values around the world must be synthesized into certain universals acceptable to the peoples of the world."²¹⁹ Douglass also proposes adherence to a set of values that is universally valid, namely the gospels. Alinsky's pragmatic approach to a universal ethics, is open-ended, aimed at meeting needs, inclusive of different cultures and social groups, do-able, and enforceable within the limits of "the world as it is."²²⁰ Douglass cares more about exposing hypocrisy and compromise.

Christian ethics uses theology in thinking through substantive issues which surface in the struggle for participation and inclusion (such as "equitable distribution of goods, taxation, health care, education, rights of the poor, military defense") and sees social action as part of bringing about a new heaven and a new earth.²²¹ Curran writes:

The human, understood as that which is existing here and now in this world, is thus not merely human or merely natural as distinguished and differentiated from the Christian and the

²¹⁶ See Alinsky, *Reveille*, 190-204. Alinsky describes the situation of democracy in the United States as so critical that "every conceivable effort must be made to rekindle the fire of democracy while a few ambers yet flow in the American dream." *Reveille*, 196.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, xvii

²¹⁸ Alinsky, *Reveille*, Introduction; Douglass, *The Non-Violent Cross*, 291.

²¹⁹ Alinsky, *Reveille*, 222.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*,

²²¹ Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, 171.

supernatural...In short, in addressing the world on the basis of the human, believers and the church community today are not speaking only on the basis of the merely natural...²²²

Effective social action is ecumenical and depends on the willingness and ability of human beings to address common problems in a spirit of dialogue within pluralistic society.²²³ Curran's confidence in democracy and grace, however, raises at least one serious concern about his methodology, because neither "stance," "model," or "person" provides the basis for this optimistic mindset. An attitude that comes from outside the method and is not methodologically subject to critical judgment can easily and undetectably skew its conclusions. Likewise, one must ask where Curran's position of a gradualist, integrative relationship between church and state is grounded in method. The meaning of sin and especially of eschatology in Curran's theological stance provides some explanation for bringing in values that have not been identified by adherence to method. Curran construes eschatology temporally as the time between the two comings of Jesus, in which the Christian is

vigilant and ready to criticize abuses [in society]...strives to make the kingdom more present in this world, but [knows] the fullness of justice will never be there...[aware] there can be some truly human progress in history, but such progress is ordinarily slow and painful.²²⁴

There is little theological content in this eschatology. What is the vital meaning of living between the two comings? Curran seems to say little more than "try hard, but expect the worst." With this cautious approach to change and the methodological irregularities just noted, Curran's attempt to translate or mediate Catholic social teaching to the non-Catholic community, instead of developing what he earlier described as a hermeneutic for understanding history and discerning the action of God in the world, remains within a natural law, humanist framework.

D. A natural law revisionist approach

Curran's preference for natural law is based on the theological claim that all human beings are responsible for how they live and all human beings have access to what they need to know in order to do

²²² Charles E. Curran, "Review Symposium, *American Catholic Social Ethics*, by Charles E. Curran: Author's Response," *Horizons* 9 (Fall, 1982): 344-45.

²²³ Curran states: "If people have the power and opportunity to act, in the long run and most of the time they will make the right decision." *Catholic Social Ethics*, 160; see Alinsky, *Reveille*, 15.

²²⁴ Curran, *American Catholic Social Ethics*, 284.

this. In Curran's familiar phraseology this affirms that there are sources of ethical wisdom apart from and compatible with faith and biblical revelation. Curran enhances this theological claim with the affirmation that all human reality, *qua* human, is influenced historically by grace (the Christian mysteries). Curran holds, that because there is no distinct Christian content in ethics, there is room for both a humanistic and a Christian approach to the same moral reality.

In conclusion, there can be room for two approaches. Christian social ethics as such should reflect on social reality in the light of explicitly Christian concerns, sources, and understanding. Such an approach can also be used to address the broader society. However, the same teaching and understanding can sometimes be presented to the religiously pluralistic human community using sources, reflections, and approaches which are common to all and not distinctively Christian.²²⁵

The various sources of ethical wisdom (natural law and scripture, faith and reason) exist in a dialectical relationship similar to the relation between church and society or the goodness of creation and the reality of sin. In this dialectic the humanistic interpretation of morality and the Christian approach interface. Natural law refers to the normative dimension of human experience, which is necessary for the completeness of the church's religious and theological moral understanding. In this revision of natural law, "human experience," historically realized in contingent relationships and understood variously through a plurality of meanings, replaces "human nature" as the source of moral norms. This is how Curran understands Vatican II when it speaks of responding to the problems that the world faces in the light of human experience and the gospel.

In replacing "nature" by "human experience," Curran introduces more than a change of terminology. In the older theory, nature was the "object" that human reason, as "subject," reflected on, in order to discover God's moral plan. In Curran's project, human experience is not understood as an objective event prior to human reflection, but human living mediated by meaning—Christian or non-Christian. In discerning the "signs of the time," the church listens to and queries all ethical meanings, as expressing human moral consciousness. "The practical need to work together calls for an ecumenical aspect to Catholic social ethics,"²²⁶ that is, an aspect of dialogue and collaboration with the world.

²²⁵ Curran, *American Catholic Social Ethics*, 287.

²²⁶ Curran, *American Catholic Social Ethics*, 294.

Curran seeks momentum and inspiration for his project in the church's tradition, with its preference for an ethics based on reason and human nature. His endorsement of natural law ethics, however, has the following revisions: it must be historically construed, centered on the person, and take into consideration both the presence of the redeeming power of grace in history and be cognizant not only of the limitations of sin on human behavior, but the limits of human knowledge in coming to any kind of universally true answers to moral problems.

The success of this project depends, in a substantial way, on its ability to produce a framework for a religious interpretation of history, a hermeneutics that would reflect the self-consciousness of the church. At the same time, it would facilitate constructive and ecumenical action that symbolizes and contributes to the salvation of the world. In order to effectively discover and express its solidarity with the world, while simultaneously bearing witness to the eschatological fulfillment of the world in Christ, the church requires a moral theology that, in Lonergan's terms, raises the church's consciousness to the moral and religious level of responsibility. Negotiating this task, which is truly beyond the capacity of any one theologian, will require not only a theologically solid social ethics, an eschatologically balanced theology of history, and a realistic theory of state, but also, in the light of the Council's central concern, a credible theology of the church.

As David O'Brien points out, the authors considered in Curran's historical review of American Catholic social thought took for granted "the existence and stability of the church; its priority and superiority to any world in which it found itself; and the abundance and foundational righteousness of America...The ethical debates of the past...were held together by the disciplines of the subculture." O'Brien adds that these disciplines "may well split into pieces...unless we ground the conversation in a living church within a dynamic culture for whose common future we acknowledge full responsibility."²²⁷

It is not enough, however, to merely point this out. If a consistent and coherent theology of the church is not part of a revised natural law, the decisions and response of the church (local, regional, universal) will, of necessity, employ the symbols, constructs, and meaning systems dominant at any one

²²⁷ David J. O'Brien, "Review Symposium, *American Catholic Social Ethics: Twentieth Century Approaches*, by Charles E. Curran," *Horizons* 9 (Fall, 1982): 338-340.

time in society.²²⁸ The responses and actions, through which the church (as agent and subject of moral action) shapes and defines itself, will be merely notional and alien to the church's self-realization. The agency and subjectivity of the church is essential to the process that Curran proposes: to move social ethics from its basis in a timeless, God-planned, and objective ideal of society to an understanding of social morality as personal, relational, historically limited, and transcendently motivated.

In fact, Curran seems to work with a static understanding of the church that differs little from the church of John A. Ryan or John C. Murray. His preference for political liberalism risks reducing the church to one of many groups within society, with the result that ethical reasoning is deprived of the religious and moral terms and images that come from historical reason (knowledge mediated by the experience of Christian faith and community). Curran's commitment to a revision of the church's teaching tradition and of the tradition of natural law appears to herald an approach that remains caught in the past. In John Noonan's words, "the tradition inhabited by Curran is a world remote from the presuppositions of debates of the modern world outside the church . For him the old presuppositions hold."²²⁹

²²⁸ See Peter L. Berger, *A Far Glory: The Quest for Faith in an Age of Credulity* (New York: The Free Press, 1992), 76-78.

²²⁹ John T. Noonan, Jr., review of *The Catholic Moral Tradition Today*, by Charles E. Curran, *New York Times Book Review*, October 24, 1999, 34.

CHAPTER FOUR

CURRAN'S SOCIAL ETHICS

*The Catholic moral tradition has developed over a long history. A systematic presentation of the tradition as it now is cannot also be a full history of its development. However, a systematic approach to the moral tradition must be in dialogue with the more significant aspects of its past history.*¹

The importance of the Catholic tradition for Curran is evidenced in the attention he gives it. That tradition supplies the context for the development of a creative openness to new situations, while guarding an identity on which the approaches can find trustworthy foundations. The tradition reinforces the value of moral discourse within the church, which, empowered by the Holy Spirit, “continues in time and space the salvific work of the risen Jesus and the one he called Abba.”² The history of Catholic social teaching shows that the tradition does and ought to move in a direction that is in conformity to the truth as discerned by the church.

A. Curran's place in the tradition of Catholic social ethics

The Second Vatican Council is a milestone in the development of the self-understanding of the Catholic Church, which emerged from this event, both in consciousness and practice, a world-church. The church sees itself in terms of the grief and the anguish, the joy and the hope of humankind, even as it strives to comprehend and live out what this means. It calls itself a sacrament of God's saving relationship with the world. This new consciousness requires action--concrete and specific decisions that embody the church's response to and responsibility for the world. These choices proceed from and shape its identity. This historical context and the call for “action on behalf of justice” and “participation in the transformation of the world” provide the framework for Curran's moral theology project.³ His ecclesial aim is to make the

¹ Curran, *The Catholic Moral Tradition* ix.

² Curran, *The Catholic Moral Tradition*, 2.

³ Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, 119.

social mission of the church “a living reality on the pastoral level in the life of the church...[Indeed] to bring this about in practice is perhaps the primary pastoral problem facing the church at the present time.”⁴

In terms of methodology, Curran regards his project as being in line with four characteristics of the Catholic tradition.⁵ First, the tradition is a complex of scripture, belief, worship, and moral life developed and passed on in a process of understanding, interpretation, appropriation, and living within a community of faith. Second, the tradition is marked by a universality that expresses a care for God’s creation and openness to the human community. “The Catholic Church as seen, for example, in its social teaching and papal encyclicals works together with all others for a just, free, participative, and sustainable society.”⁶ Third, the tradition is inclusive. It does not arbitrarily limit the sources of moral wisdom to scripture alone or the repeated positions of former popes. Fourth, the tradition exhibits a preference for systematic approaches that are coherent and consistent with and accessible to human rationality. Curran works as a recipient and beneficiary of the Catholic tradition of social ethics and its Thomistic-Scholastic theological rationality.

Because Curran’s writings expose a tendency to define his vision of a revised natural law in terms of a comparative relation to its neo-Scholastic predecessor, the stated goal of something new remains somewhat vague. Therefore, since Curran’s revision remains logically dependent on the category of natural law, it becomes necessary to review the conditions under which his project might be judged successful.

Curran’s purpose requires a hermeneutics of human experience and of history that is theologically sound and rationally intelligible. In social ethics as in personal ethics Curran is not so much an opponent of natural law theory, as one who wants to reformulate it and apply it in light of historical contingency and in terms of human history theologically construed as salvation history. Such an approach will have to meet the theological and rational requirements of the Catholic tradition and provide the insight necessary to recognize and respond to the presence and action of God in contemporary social realities. It will be “rationally understandable and defensible”⁷ in a way that provides a bridge for consulting, in

⁴ Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, 119.

⁵ Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, ix-xi.

⁶ Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, x.

⁷ Curran, *American Catholic Social Ethics*, 286.

dialogue, the broad range of human experience that constitutes social reality. The moral response to any social situation, construed as a unique and particular historical challenge, must occur within the parameters of history and emerge in a historical process of knowing.

"Natural law" will serve as a heuristic construct that guides moral inquiry. Curran subscribes to the "theological" meaning of natural law, that there are sources of ethical wisdom accessible to all human beings through reason and reflection. To speak of natural law as a divine doctrine or plan that cannot be understood apart from a classicist cosmology is to speak in a monologue—in a language no longer accessible to the modern mentality and from a position of isolation as authoritative interpreter of what society ought to be doing.

A revised natural law method will facilitate the kind of relationship with the world necessary for Christians—individually and as church—to learn the ethical claims that are intrinsic in any social situation. Curran's revision of natural law is based on human experience, including the moral experience of both Roman Catholics and all others. It does not judge life in the world apart from living in faith (as in the older two-tiered approach). The moral striving of others is accepted as a legitimate source of moral knowledge for the Christian, a starting point for discovering and interpreting the "signs of the times." Moral theology attempts to make explicit, by theological reflection, what is implicit in all human experience. Since the relationship between human experience and the light of the Gospel "is dialectical,"⁸ critical dialogue is a necessary component of discovering the call of God in social reality and for facilitating cooperation with the modern world in making God's reign more present in our history.

A revised natural law method will be ecumenical because of the universality of God's gift and the relational structure of life. Curran holds that the cognitional process is common to all and that ethical judgments emerge in that process, through which a person moves from awareness of what is happening toward understanding, deliberation, and responsible action, such that knowing connects with living and creativity connects with values. Coming-to-know morally is a relational process, since moral knowledge is knowledge of self in the multiple relationships that are signaled by the historical social matrix within which

⁸ Curran, *American Catholic Social Ethics*, 283.

we act. As social relationships include the perspectives and meanings of all involved in the relationship, dialogue with other participants is critical to gaining a full understanding of what is occurring. Method, therefore, will be ecumenical, that is, open to the moral thinking of all.⁹ The theological premise of the universality of grace and the relational structure of life implies that the church must consult with and learn from the experience, reflection, and commitment of others, in order to not leave out anything essential in discerning the call and grace of God.

A revised natural law approach will have both a subject and an object pole. Therefore, it will identify the decision-maker or social agent in its considerations. Curran's method of using experience to determine what is right and wrong in human, social conduct reflects the personalist understanding that moral criteria are incomplete until one considers what the decision implies for the growth and transformation of the subject. The action is not considered in itself, but in terms of how it affects the agent and the agent's relationships to God, others, society, world, and self. When the church (in its worldwide, national, regional or parochial communities) is considered the decision maker, it is essential to examine how this choice makes the church more faithful to God, to its mission, and to the world that it is committed to transform.

Social issues and causes abound, appearing at an astonishing rate, worldwide in scope and with overwhelming complexity, while basic themes—such as poverty, racism, and violence—seem to perdure. Moral theology can claim no special competence for identifying social problems or proposing “an adequate model of the social mission of the church.”¹⁰ This task falls to the church as a whole in its individual communities and is carried out through a discerning dialogue. Following Paul VI, Curran points out: “any true discernment process...must call for the cooperation of all in discerning these problems—especially those who are oppressed and suffering.”¹¹ The theologian's role appears in “the obligation of pointing out the problem and helping initiate the dialogue” that will lead to “some practical agreement on how the social

⁹ Curran adopts Lonergan's purpose equating method with a process that is concerned “with meeting the exigences and exploiting the opportunities presented by the human mind itself.” See Lonergan, *Method*, 14.

¹⁰ Lonergan, *Method*, 148.

¹¹ Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, 106.

mission of the church should be structured.”¹² It will focus on the decision-maker and the process through which good decisions are made.

Thus, a revised natural law approach will be oriented to responsible action and the mission of the church. The social complexity and global reach of the problems that the church and society face together raises the question of the means thorough which the church can carry out its mission. Solidarity with any partner in social action involves a plurality of values and perspectives, along with some willingness to compromise. Concerns for a more human world are carried by global movements and by groups working on a local and national level. This complex reality creates “a general crisis situation in which the older forms and structures [of the church’s social mission] are no longer viable and it is most difficult amid a plethora of possibilities to determine what forms should be adopted.”¹³ Approaching social questions from an empirical, pragmatic position, Curran insists that in developing its social mission (at whatever level of community) the church must be guided by its limitations, as well as ideals. Natural law implies that ethical wisdom and knowledge is accessible to others and the Second Vatican Council directs the church to examine social, economic, cultural and political realities not only in the light of the faith, but also in the light of human experience.

Catholics frequently participate in non-religious movements and need to integrate these commitments with a consciousness of working to bring about the kingdom of God. In shaping its social mission, the church will respect the “autonomy and competencies of these other groupings within society” and even value them as possible manifestations of God’s grace at work for the benefit of society.¹⁴ Responsible action will be open to build on and cooperate ecumenically with other Christian churches or any group involved in building a better society. The possibility of compromise as responsible action will be found in “the distance of such questions from the core of faith and from the complexity of these specific questions.”¹⁵ Even among themselves, the members of the church may differ on values and strategies. In Curran’s view, this means that the church must act as a “community in which serious dialogue takes place

¹² Curran, *New Perspectives*, 157.

¹³ Curran, *New Perspectives*, 147.

¹⁴ Curran, *New Perspectives*, 142.

¹⁵ Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, 122.

about what the Gospel call us to do in terms of changing societies.”¹⁶ In dialogue the church can experience the call of God (the ethical claim) and respond to God in faith (the concrete, contingent moral choice and action). At stake are the church’s fidelity to itself, an understanding of its inner nature and outer mission, and an answer to “the great, sprawling ecumenical question.”¹⁷

B. Curran’s proposed method for social ethics

The methodological shift toward integration of the natural and supernatural and a commitment to historical thinking gives Catholic social ethics a distinctly theological task and has “ramifications for Christian social ethics and the social mission of the church.”¹⁸ Moral theology must account for the transcendental dimension of social action and positively relate the Gospel and the kingdom of God “to the world and the social problems facing human existence.” At the same time, in order to carry on an effective dialogue with the world, the approach must be based in experience, recognizing “the need for critical reason and an emphasis on praxis.”¹⁹

Curran follows the moral theological approach described in the second chapter of this study, without developing a methodology that is specific to social ethics. The three foundational issues for moral theology, in general, remain the same for social ethics: historical consciousness, the turn toward personalism, and the relationship-response model of morality.²⁰ One must question at this point whether a method that is rooted in the process of individual conscience is able to adapt to the requirements of social ethics. It will be necessary to review the four steps of Curran’s method, with a view toward answering this question.

Stance. Stance is the horizon of understanding within which the ethicist seeks to discern moral meaning in any social situation. It also provides the context for discussing the multiple sources of ethical wisdom: scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. The stance Curran adopts is a clear departure from how the

¹⁶ Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, 124.

¹⁷ John Courtney Murray, “The Schema on Religious Freedom,” (1963), quoted in Hooper, *The Ethics of Discourse*, 158.

¹⁸ Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, 64.

¹⁹ Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, 108.

²⁰ Curran, *Tensions*, 89.

world and society are viewed in the older natural law approach. Curran does not assume a reasonable blueprint of how society should be structured and function that can be deduced from an abstract understanding of social human nature. He begins with human social experience, which is contradictory at best, negative at worst. Curran approaches the task of making moral sense out of social experience with the assumption that the factors at work in society can be understood from a stance defined by the Christian beliefs about creation, sin, incarnation, redemption, and resurrection destiny, which serve as a perceptual framework for interpreting Christian concepts, human progress, and conflict situations.²¹ If moral theology is to offer an “account for the fact that the kingdom has already begun,”²² then it must bring the ambiguity of human experience and the irreversible victory of Christ’s resurrection into some positive relationship. This is particularly true for complex social situations, which are beyond the control of any one person or single group in society.

The resurrection of Jesus impacts historically and socially on all humankind, but the fullness of the impact will not be attained within human history or as the result of human endeavor. The victory over sin and human limitation, as well as the final liberation of human beings from all unjust social relationships remain God’s gracious gift at the end of time. There is continuity as well as discontinuity between the eschatological kingdom and historical reality. Christian faith in the future serves as “a negative critique of existing structures”²³ and identifies “positive aspects in terms of the values, goals, ideals and attitudes that must be present in all Christian approaches [to social change].” Eschatology “strengthens the individual to continue commitment to the struggle even where success seems all too absent.”²⁴

The doctrine of creation affirms the trustworthiness of humanity but is also a reminder of its limitations, which are further compromised by the power of sin in the world. Within this anthropocentric horizon, Curran interprets the other mysteries.

The consciousness of the future eschaton as judgment and a realistic appraisal of sin in the world should be joined with the assertion that all reality is a medium through which a loving God makes himself available to men. God is present and revealing not in a pure form but rather mixed

²¹ Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, 52; see Grecco, *A Theology of Compromise*, 31-44, where the author provides a detailed analysis of the meaning and function of stance in Curran’s writings.

²² Curran, *American Catholic Social Ethics*, 276.

²³ Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, 111.

²⁴ Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, 112.

together with many other elements, so that Christian theology needs to develop a critical process for determining God's revelation here and now.²⁵

This critical process may not result in interpretations that "overcome the dichotomy between the good news of the Gospel and the scandal of human suffering," but should be able to move in that direction.²⁶ Stance requires that Christian ethics proceed in an inductive manner, in a way that seeks to understand, appropriate, and communicate the believed realities that are constitutive of the tradition of scripture and the theological legacy of the church. Stance, moreover, is different from "sheer existentialism [which] sees the present moment in isolation from the before and after of time, with no binding relationships to persons and values in the present."²⁷ All human history is the story of God's promise and makes sense in relation to God.

"The eschatological understanding" together with a recognition of the other factors of salvation history argue "against simplistic solutions to social problems."²⁸ Stance, therefore, affirms human reality in its social, moral, and historical complexity and serves "both as a guide for Christian ethics and as a source of criticism of other proposals that have been put forth."²⁹ Curran does not build an ontological model or develop a hermeneutics that shows how these mysteries function in human history and society, strengthening Grecco's observation that Curran's project is "not to build foundations, but to reveal them; to explicate them, not to prove them."³⁰

Model. Whereas stance sheds light on general themes, model (in Curran's approach) brings those themes to bear on the concreteness and particularity of social-historical reality. Model refers to the way moral theology poses the question: what ought one to do. Some models construe the "ought" in terms of law and conforming to duty; others are based on the final or intermediate ends of an action (for example, the beatific vision, happiness, or the greatest good for the greatest number). Seeing morality in terms of relationality-responsibility suggests that ethical norms emerge in the historical-social matrix of the multiple

²⁵ Curran, *New Perspectives*, 127.

²⁶ Curran, *New Perspectives*, 125. The quote is taken from a proposed document of the National Conference of Catholic Charities, "A Theology of Charity" (1971)

²⁷ Curran, *Tensions In Moral Theology* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 89.

²⁸ Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, 113.

²⁹ Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, 52.

³⁰ Grecco, *A Theology of Compromise*, 31.

relationships that constitute one's reality and determine the kind of response that is appropriate to the demands implicit in the need to foster and develop those relationships.³¹ This model does not exclude the importance of principles, duties, values or end, but locates their relevant meaning in how they relate to one another and contribute to the task of being responsible for the human relationships of which any person or groups are part.

Curran holds that the relation-response model most effectively facilitates insight into what is happening in actual social relationships and the possibilities that are available for redeeming or transforming them. We "live in a network of different relationships in which there can be no minutely codified plans of conduct but in a creative way the individual determines, by properly responding to all these demands upon him, the way in which he should respond and live his life."³² Christian social responsibility comes to light in the historical-social matrix of social exchange--a historical, experiential, and dialogical relationship that concretizes and delimits moral responsibility. The Christian dialogue is transformative, involving a process of learning and praxis, through which the agent and the relationships, in which the agent is constituted, are changed.³³ Such a model is not only *about* dialogue; it *requires* dialogue, as moral discourse, both with society and within the church, in arriving at shared moral solutions to common concerns.

Historically emergent human knowledge, whatever its source, is necessary for Christian ethics to form correct theological interpretations of social issues. The structures and institutions (more or less stable) of social life are the result of a process of developing common beliefs and common values. In this social-dialectical process, issues of fact and issues of value are not easily separated. Since social, political, economic, and cultural structures are not based primarily on order and reason, but on power and the interests of dominant groups, model must be able to see "the world around us not as a structure of 'order' but as a 'sea of influences' or as a conflict of interests."³⁴ Curran proposes a model that can take power and

³¹ Curran, *Tensions*, 96.

³² Curran, *Dialogue*, 152-53.

³³ Grecco, *A Theology of Compromise*, 64-72.

³⁴ Edward LeRoy Long, Jr., *A Survey of Christian Ethics* (1967), quoted in Curran, *Dialogue*, 178.

conflict into consideration, not only as manifestations of sin in human history, but also as positive means toward more just and human social relationships.

Relationality-responsibility reflects the complexity of historical situations and the impossibility of determining norms deductively or on the basis of outcomes. It urges people to become aware of their position in social situations. For example, the position of the one who suffers injustice is different from that of one who is not directly touched by it, and different again from that of one who is unreflectively part of the problem. This model requires an inductive and empirical approach in order to identify and unpack the moral meaning of social structures, relationships, and the proposals to alter them. It underscores the need for critical reasoning and readiness for “self-criticism and detachment”³⁵ in those who resist or take part in action to transform society.

The relationality-responsibility model closely approximates the biblical notion of morality as a response to God establishing relationships that can be religiously symbolized as covenant, discipleship, and kingdom of God. In order to make these symbols comprehensible in the human work of the transformation of the world, Curran has recourse to the concept of mediation. “God’s plan for human action is primarily known, not directly and immediately from God, but rather in and through our understanding of the human.”³⁶ For Catholic social ethics to succeed in bringing together “its understanding of human reason and human beings into a total Christian perspective,” implies that human experience “must be seen primarily as mediating the meanings and symbols of faith.”³⁷

In order to conceptualize social morality ethically and theologically Christian ethics proceeds inductively, paying serious attention to human experience, human reason, and human endeavors as sources of ethical wisdom and knowledge and as signs of God’s presence and activity. Who we are and what is fitting and required for human relationships (including the relationship with God, with nature, with the past and with the future) represent historical knowing that cannot be predicated in advance of reflected experience.

³⁵ Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, 117.

³⁶ Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, 108-09.

³⁷ Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, 53.

Ethical implications of using the relation-response model include the impossibility of authenticating any given social structure or proposing ready-made models on the basis of prior, general principles. Instead, Christian ethics must be prepared to “undertake the daring and creative innovations which the present state of the world requires.”³⁸ This model leaves room for more than one “Catholic” response, because there cannot be absolute certitude about where and how to share in God’s grace-giving re-ordering activity in the world. To the complexity that is uncovered in an inductive approach, Curran adds that there is often a great distance between specific moral conclusions and the core of faith.³⁹ The lack of certainty, the grounding of dissent, and the difficulty of finding consensus on what responses to social evils are obliging on the Christian are explained by Curran with reference to both stance and model.

Within this inescapable pluralism, however, there are also constants. For example, the Gospel “itself always transcends all culture and serves as negative critique of all existing culture”⁴⁰ and social reform must always be tied closely to “the dignity of the individual and the rights of the human person...[as] the basis of an adequate social ethic.”⁴¹ Curran is aware of the need to be specific and acknowledges the problems associated with this model.

Responsibility tends to be a term which all would favor but remains capable of many different interpretations. For this reason in the future theologians might have to adopt more specific models which flesh out the more generic approach of the model of responsibility.⁴²

Person. The focus of social ethics in the Catholic church reveals a “very significant shift ...away from an emphasis on human nature with a concomitant stress on order, the acceptance of some [social] inequality, and ...obedience to the many controlling authorities to a recognition of the vital importance of the human person with the concomitant need for freedom, equality, and participation.”⁴³ In Curran’s revised natural law approach, the nature of the state or society is not the source of social norms. Instead, the person and social groups, as agents and subjects of their own actions, become the central consideration of what can and ought to occur. Curran focuses on human beings as responsible for structuring their world and governing

³⁸ *Octogesima Adveniens*, n. 37.

³⁹ Curran, *Directions*, 272.

⁴⁰ Curran, *Tension*, 195.

⁴¹ Curran, *American Catholic Social Ethics*, 287.

⁴² Curran, *Dialogue*, 156.

⁴³ Curran, *Tensions*, 93.

themselves. The turn toward personalism also is reflected in an ethical position that stresses the human rights of freedom, equality, and participation along with the values of truth, justice, and love as essential to a just society.⁴⁴

Curran holds that an important function of Christian social ethics is to help Christians and the church assume public responsibilities and to become “public Christians.”⁴⁵ Since the church is not yet prepared for “its ongoing dialogue with society,”⁴⁶ moral theology prepares Christians to enter and be effective “in the conversation...[and] effectively meet this challenge” of being a church that acts and responds to the issues, concerns, and problems of the society in which it is part.

Curran names several factors as relevant to viewing society in terms of persons. These include values, virtues, norms, and principles that belong to the tradition of scripture, church teachings, and the moral sense of believers and non-believers alike. The positions that are proposed by moral theology in opposition to sinful social realities understand the person and social relationships in relation to the values, virtues, and norms that pertain to Christian faith. However, these Christian and human values are subject to human determination and do not determine human behavior, which remains the responsibility of those who share in the relationships to be transformed.

Curran subscribes to an eschatological understanding, in which the “Gospel cannot be relegated merely to the realm of the supernatural, but...is ultimately destined to have some effect on all human reality, although we can never forget that the fullness of the kingdom will only come at the end of time.” Therefore, the ethics must leave room for both decline and growth in these values. The church cannot be “defined” by the ideal alone, but embraces a “social mission...[that] strives to make the Gospel aspects of love, justice, and peace ever more present in our world.”⁴⁷ In approaching social reform, the church will be “less radical in [its] demands and more accepting of aspects of the wider society in which it lives,” in order

⁴⁴ Curran, *Tensions*, 94-5.

⁴⁵ Curran, “*American Catholic Social Ethics: Author’s Response*,” 347.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* 347.

⁴⁷ Curran, *American Catholic Social Ethics*, 290.

to effectively partner with others.⁴⁸ Curran's understanding of eschatology or of what it means to be living between the two comings of Jesus provides the interpretive horizon of this position:

Within my eschatological approach the Christian strives to make the kingdom more present in this world, but the fullness of justice and peace will never be here... Such an eschatology grounds *a realistic anthropology* [italics mine] which recognizes the human possibilities to bring about some greater peace and justice but is also aware of the sinfulness and radical incompleteness which characterize human existence in this world... Christians are called to make peace more present in our world... Unfortunately, sometimes in our imperfect world the existing peace might only be a pretext for continuing injustice.⁴⁹

Decision Making. Curran borrows Lonergan's construal of conscience to formulate the meaning of decision-making. Christian ethics leads to judgments. Critical consciousness brings together all the understandings that have shaped the moral issue as it passes through the process of stance, model, and person. This stage of theological reflection brings together the interpretation of reality, the model of what is at stake, and system of values rooted in the dynamics of personal growth, to identify values, articulate goals, and, in freedom and creativity, to respond to the possibility of the moment by choice and action. Decision intends to transform a human, secular, social situation, but, "in accord with a transcendental model of ethics, the judgment of conscience [results]... ultimately in the self-transcending [of the] subject."⁵⁰

A theologically credible process, while not replacing the subject's responsibility, will try to show which values contribute to a just society and self-transcending conversion of attitudes and how they emerge on the basis of the first three steps of method. The coherence of a method such as Curran's depends on its reflective presentation of the dialectic movement between Christian consciousness, out of which the theologian is working, and the external action or situation that requires response.⁵¹

In the practice of social ethics, the uniqueness of individual conscience gives way, in Curran, to a more impersonal approach, which he describes as "mixed consequentialism."⁵² Mixed consequentialism involves considering the consequences of a choice and action (response) in relation to its outcomes and with reference to the principles, values, and norms that are an abiding part of the Christian ethical heritage.

⁴⁸ Curran, *American Catholic Social Ethics*, 291.

⁴⁹ Curran, *American Catholic Social Ethics*, 284-85.

⁵⁰ Curran, *Directions*, 23.

⁵¹ Grecco, *A Theology of Compromise*, 166.

⁵² Curran, *Directions*, 188.

Consequences include the transformation of the person or group who decide to act in a certain way. Because the agent is also a self-creating subject, the criterion of self-transcendence must be included. However, due to the limits of our ability to know where and how God is active in human social-historical occurrence and to what extent a decision joins one to God's self-gift, the outcomes of an action can be judged only in terms of proportionate good, in which known human goods are related and ordered to one another, such that one finds a "proportionate" reason for one's choice.⁵³

Proportionalism is a moral methodology falling under a relational approach, which offers to identify the morally right or good choice as one that will bring about a set of relationships that achieve the optimal degree of human flourishing possible, within the particular, determining historical and social context. This approach focuses on intermediate ends and values, rather than on absolute norms or ultimate ends. Thus, the determination of the overall good or harm that results from a decision—in terms of values, consequences, and self-transcendence—is weighed against other possible outcomes, within a realistic perspective that includes the limits of sin and resurrection destiny. Proportionalism does not so much determine values as arbitrate values in conflict, using the historically possible as its moral criterion. It steers a middle road between trying to determine the morality of the act either by its ideal structure alone or by its consequences alone.⁵⁴

C. Conclusion: How reliable is Curran's method?

Curran proposes a method that can facilitate dialogue, uncover common moral ground, and lead to transformational action. The basics of his method were developed in response to the ethical conflicts experienced by Catholics in regard to issues of personal, especially sexual, morality. He moves the concepts, ideas, and reasoning process from the personal into the more public area of church, civil society, and state. As Curran details his approach to social ethics, the reader must ask whether a model based on transcendental personalism and the operation of individual conscience is adequate to the new situation and whether the method remains consistent as it is applied in a social rather than personal setting. Of special

⁵³ Curran, *Directions*, 188-91.

⁵⁴ Curran, *Directions*, 178-79.

concern is the change method may undergo as issues of common meanings, common values, and common conscientious action replace the autonomy of individual conscience.

a. A theological hermeneutics of experience: from intellectual to dramatic patterns. Vatican II clearly points out that the relationship of the light of the Gospel and the light of human experience models the relationship between a Christian interpretation of reality and other interpretations, with the assumption that the two need not be opposed. *Gaudium et Spes* “draws the attention of men to consideration of some more urgent problems deeply affecting the human race at the present day in light of the Gospel and of human experience.”⁵⁵ The correct understanding of what Curran means by human experience, as well as how he actually integrates it into his reflections, is critical to evaluating his revisionist contribution to natural law theory. The meaning of human experience also impacts on how one construes the role of the church and of moral theology in the human endeavor to respond to the problems facing humanity. It is at the basis of Curran’s methodological commitment to an ethics of dialogue, in order to discern “the drag of sin and the pull of grace...[and arrive at a] concept of the truly human”⁵⁶ that can establish a common ground for moral cooperation between the church and the world.

The challenge Curran confronts is to transpose his ethical method into the social sphere, such that the religious-moral drama of history can be interpreted in a manner that will help Christians recognize and join themselves to the work of God in contingent social reality. The role of social ethics is broader than the attempt to merely insert religious and moral points of view in public discourse. Social ethics is not limited only to the institutions, structures, and policies that constitute a just society, but describes and reflects on situations of sin and social redemption. Curran believes that “grace or Christian eschatology as transforming nature and culture furnishes a more dynamic foundation [than the traditional natural law theory] for Christian ethics.”⁵⁷ Nature is seen historically and relationally as human experience in relation to salvation history and the kingdom of God.⁵⁸ To build on that foundation, critical realism--the conscientious process (method) of attending, understanding, judging, and responding--is required. Critical

⁵⁵ *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 46, *Vatican II*, 948.

⁵⁶ Curran, *Dialogue*, 130.

⁵⁷ Curran, *Dialogue*, 120-21.

⁵⁸ Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, 209; *New Perspectives*, 30

realism requires a certain coherence and consistency among insights. What can be said about reality in terms of creation, for example, cannot contradict what is perceived within the category of incarnation. The categories found in stance and model must: (1) be concretized in relation to what is happening; (2) so relate to one another as to form an intelligible pattern of events that leads to meaning; (3) identify possibilities of responsible action that align the intelligible pattern with “the dramatic pattern of...intercourse with others or the practical pattern” of action and responsibility.⁵⁹

b. Ambivalence in method: historical consciousness and formal categories. Curran’s methodological considerations reveal a degree of ambivalence that work against critical realism. On the one hand, he argues for a balancing approach that limits the occurrence of ethical conclusions that appear counter-cultural and conceives social change as a slow and gradual progress. On the other hand, he stresses the image of the pascal mystery, which entails a radical dying to the world and an even more radical overcoming of death, as paradigmatic for Christian social engagement. Curran’s reliance on the mediatory capability of the natural virtues and his generalization of the content of stance make it difficult to distinguish, for example, between “creation” and “resurrection destiny” (or history and eschatology).⁶⁰

Curran’s interpretation of human experience is essentially temporal and relational. Human history can be open to and thematically construed in theological categories, but history remains human and is only suggestive of the transcendent reality that it strives to apprehend and embrace. Only able “to include at least implicitly what the Gospel contains by way of ethical conclusions and proximate attitudes, dispositions and values,”⁶¹ Curran’s method is silent on the actuality and force of grace. Since human experience replaces nature as the central concept in Curran’s revision of natural law theory, the success of his project depends on its ability to provide a credible and coherent theological hermeneutics of historical and social human experience. At the beginning of this chapter, Curran’s theological project was positioned

⁵⁹ See Lonergan, *Insight*, 292-95.

⁶⁰ See, for example, Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, 52. Here Curran notes that according to the doctrine of creation the world remains good despite the effects of sin. Resurrection destiny tells us that building on the goodness of creation can help us recognize “that redeeming love continues to transform the present realities,” although not fully. The second statement, about the redeeming love of Christ, merely elaborates on, but adds nothing substantial to the first statement, that the goodness of creation continues to have validity for human responsibility.

⁶¹ Curran, *Dialogue*, 22.

in relation to the critical task of developing a framework for interpreting history and the church's role within history. The formal character of stance and model work against their power to interpret historical reality, unless Curran's method also embraces the meditational responsibility to relate, in dialectical fashion, various aspects of human social problems to those theological mysteries that are constitutive of historical reality.

c. *Dialogue and meaning.* The problem of hermeneutics becomes evident in the demands of dialogue. "Perhaps the most significant characteristic of the entire work of Vatican II was the emphasis on dialogue. Dialogue also describes what is occurring in contemporary moral theology...."⁶² In a pluralistic society, the church and Catholics, in their social mission, "must act with others for the good of society and of the entire human race even though these others do not share Christian beliefs."⁶³ From this position it is evident that a "common ground morality" is necessary. Curran's determination to find ways to revise natural law theory testifies to his conviction that common ground morality is possible. But there is an inevitable tension in this task. As the church undertakes to speak to the world in an unrestricted dialogue about the meaning of life, it struggles to find adequate theological and ecclesiological models for understanding itself and its relationship with the world and so moves into places not previously part of its self-consciousness.⁶⁴

Curran holds out little hope for agreement on the "big" questions such as: What does it mean to be human, to be free, to be have choices? What is the value or significance of life in the face of the unforeseen, of conflict, or of death? He argues, rather, that common ground is discovered as church and society address specific issues. The pragmatics of social communication control the purpose of dialogue more than the possibilities of meaning. As a result, the critical function of dialectic remains extrinsic to method.

Gaudium et Spes is also concerned with effective social communication, but acknowledges deeper problems of meaning. The changing structure of life, the progress of science and technology, and the

⁶² Curran, *Toward an American Catholic Moral Theology* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987), 15.

⁶³ Curran, *Contemporary Problems*, 227.

⁶⁴ See. Hermann-Josef Grosse Kracht, *Kirche in ziviler Gesellschaft: Studien zur Konfliktgeschichte von katholischer Kirche und demokratischer Öffentlichkeit* (Paderborn, Germany: Ferdinand Schoeningh, 1997), 214-258.

emergence of historical and global consciousness have “wrought change on the cultural sphere and habits of thought,” making it necessary to substitute “a dynamic and more evolutionary concept of nature for a static one, and the result is an immense series of problems calling for a new endeavor of analysis and synthesis.”⁶⁵ The Council expresses a goal: that through dialogue both church and society achieve a new synthesis of meaning and responsibility. “Common ground,” therefore, is not viewed as compromise, but in Lonergan’s expression, the attainment of a “higher integration of human living.”⁶⁶ Dialogue moves from intellectual synthesis to the historical, narrative patterns of human living, where reality is mediated by meanings and meanings are understood in relation to reality. Curran’s formal categories of theological and ethical meaning must move to historically concrete reality, in order for effective dialogue to occur.

d. The church as moral agent and subject. The task of integrating the central symbols of faith and their meaning in human experience is essential for the church to “speak to all men in order to unfold the mystery that is man and cooperate in tackling the main problems facing the world today.”⁶⁷ The ability of moral theology to speak convincingly of the transcendental meaning of life and history in terms of Christian beliefs serves as a measure of how far Christian ethics has moved in the direction indicated by the Council. In dialogue, the church becomes “a public church.”⁶⁸ This, however, is not enough. The church, in learning how to be a public church and to take part in an ongoing dialogue with society, will also have to come to know itself historically.

The church, as moral agent, responds to God’s specific grace in society; as subject it responds to God’s specific grace that constitutes it “the church.” As Curran carries his methodology over into the sphere of the social (with its structures, institutions, and processes), he is rarely clear about the identity of the moral agent discussed by the ethicist: church, state, government, or society. This ambiguity makes it difficult to bring to bear the full force of a historical, empirical method on the process of attaining moral knowledge. Just as stance and model are integral to the situation of the decision-maker, the self-consciousness of the decision-maker is integral to the substantive significance of stance and model.

⁶⁵ *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 5, *Vatican II*, 906-7.

⁶⁶ Lonergan, *Insight*, 655.

⁶⁷ *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 10, *Vatican II*, 911.

⁶⁸ Charles E. Curran, “Author’s Response,” 347.

In order to make sense of itself as a public church, the church needs to understand society as historically given. In a relationality-response approach, “public church” acquires operational meaning in terms of the society to which it relates. Because that society is in process, moral theology will employ an emergent rather than a static understanding of the church.

Neither a mere course of human events nor a melioristic, progressive inevitability, historical society is the temporal-historical milieu of human living, of relationships and responsibilities toward God, self, others, the human habitat, the past and the future. The church, as world-church, is inseparable from historical society. In order to give this view of history the normative value it requires to enter critically into moral reasoning, moral theology will employ an inductive and empirical methodology that views concrete situations as expressions of ethical disorder and sources of moral hope. It will also understand the world-church as co-responsible, and therefore, the moral agent whose historical self-consciousness is integral to the process of ethical reflection.

An important factor that contributes to the church’s critical self-consciousness is its understanding of the times in which it lives, its eschatology. Curran “sees the Christian as living between the two comings of Jesus,”⁶⁹ during which interim the “Gospel cannot be relegated merely to the realm of the supernatural, but the Gospel is ultimately destined to have some effect on all human reality, although we can never forget that the fullness of the kingdom will only come at the end of time.”⁷⁰ In these times, Curran insists, the church may not be “defined” as in opposition to the world. This would make the church into a sect. Curran argues: “The church is a larger gathering of believers less radical in their demands and more accepting of aspects of the wider society in which it lives, [than a sect] and whose social mission is to strive “to make the Gospel aspects of love, justice, and peace ever more present in our world.”⁷¹ Curran’s understanding of the church is stamped by an interpretive horizon of what it means to be living between the two comings of Jesus.

Within my eschatological approach the Christian strives to make the kingdom more present in this world, but the fullness of justice and peace will never be here...Such an eschatology grounds a realistic anthropology which recognizes the human possibilities to bring about some greater peace

⁶⁹ Curran, *American Catholic Social Ethics*, 284.

⁷⁰ Curran, *American Catholic Social Ethics*, 290.

⁷¹ Curran, *American Catholic Social Ethics*, 291.

and justice but is also aware of the sinfulness and radical incompleteness which characterize human existence in this world...Christians are called to make peace more present in our world...Unfortunately, sometimes in our imperfect world the existing peace might only be a pretext for continuing injustice.⁷²

This quote provides a clear example of what has been described as Curran's balance theory, by which he takes a "both-and" approach to ensure that nothing relevant is left out of the picture. John A. Coleman points out a significant weakness in this approach. "The problem with most balance theories, such as Curran's, is that they gradually forget Aristotle's wisdom that often 'excess' and one-sidedness is necessary to achieve a genuine balance in a historical situation already deeply unbalanced." The persecution of the early church, the institutionalizing of the imperial church, and the division of medieval Christendom all impact variously on the church's identity and how it relates to society. Historical situatedness also impacts on the process of moral decision-making. Coleman adds that Curran's approach to balancing his perspective does not take into consideration what is happening historically, but "remains, almost totally, formal. It is a listing of ingredients without a recipe for their appropriate measure."⁷³ The ambiguity of the "both-and" leads to an impression of "yes-but" that can only be overcome by a historical consciousness. A historically conscious interpretation allows theology to perceive a social situation as a *kairos*, which gives a "this-ness" and "now-ness" to the compelling requirement of a moral responsibility and Christian fidelity.

The balance theory also introduces a methodological bias against taking a radical position in relation to a situation. Lisa Sowle Cahill thinks that this places at risk the church's "countercultural" role in society.⁷⁴ It limits the options that the church (as social agent) has at its disposal and lessens the self-transcending potential of the church (as subject). Curran, however, maintains that his balanced approach is

grounded in a Catholic notion of church and a chastened natural law...[and] I do not see how one who accepts both a chastened natural law and an inclusive church with a concern for what is going on in the world can be profoundly countercultural.⁷⁵

⁷² Curran, *American Catholic Social Ethics*, 284-85.

⁷³ John A. Coleman, "Review Symposium: Charles E. Curran's *American Catholic Social Ethics*," *Horizons* 9 (Fall, 1982): 330-31.

⁷⁴ Lisa Sowle Cahill, "Review Symposium: Charles E. Curran's *The Catholic Moral Tradition Today: A Synthesis*," *Horizons* 26 (Fall, 1999): 343.

⁷⁵ Charles E. Curran, "Review Symposium: Charles E. Curran's *The Catholic Moral Tradition Today: A Synthesis*, Author's response," *Horizons* 26 (Fall, 1999): 356.

Cahill's concern raises the question of the model of church operative in Curran's thought. Curran typically proposes a "both-and" position and his response to Cahill stresses pluralism and diversity, divergence and even dissent in ethical approach and conclusions. However, he uncharacteristically leaves little room for responses within Roman Catholicism that reflect a sectarian stance.

In scientific investigation, model has a predictive value. What the church will become as a result of a moral choice/commitment ought to be closely associated with the predictive value of the ethical model employed: relationality-responsibility, the covenant community, and the reign of God. To gain some perspective on the breadth of pluralism in the church and the world, moral theological method has need of a historical, experience based verification process. Such a process would aim at demonstrating how divergent positions lead back (or not) to the same place: the church, shaping and actualizing itself in response to the gift of God out of which it originates. As it is, Curran's method deals with only one part of the theological task. Lonergan calls this the mediating phase or field approach, in which moral theological sense is made out of human experience. The second phase, apparently not included in Curran's methodology is called the "mediated phase," in which one verifies the conclusions of the first phase and reconciles them, where necessary, with other ethical conclusions and with those of other sciences.⁷⁶

The next two chapters will examine Curran's treatment of several particular social issues. It will be evident that Curran is not primarily interested in offering solutions to the substantive issues raised. Instead, he focuses on methodological issues and offers his critical analysis of several proposed positions. I have already indicated some places of possible inconsistency and lack of coherence in Curran's method, as well as the apparent lack of an adequate eschatology. The effectiveness of the method that Curran is proposing for moral theology will be seen in the way it is used throughout the following discussions.

⁷⁶ Lonergan, *Method*, 144-45; 267.

CHAPTER FIVE

INDIVIDUAL FREEDOM AND THE COMMON GOOD

From the theological perspective the more significant questions concern method—how theology should approach such social questions and how the church should carry out its social mission...However, these more methodological questions might best be raised in the context of a particular substantive issue.¹

At the basis of Curran's method is the concern for what is happening and the commitment to meet the demands and exploit the opportunities of human responsibility that are intrinsic to the moral or human situation. The test of the methodology is found in what happens when it is applied to particular substantive questions. Kenneth Melchin, in analyzing the heuristic structure of Lonergan's methodology, notes that method can and ought to be tested in the following manner. The results or conclusions that the moral theologian reaches must first be able to demonstrate and "establish whether these insights [of the ethicist] integrate all relevant experiential data and thus correspond to the recurrent intelligibility immanent in the ongoing routines of human existence."² Second, the conclusions must be able to meet the verification standards that lay bare the relation between the contingent (conditioned) judgment and the requirements of human responsibility (conditions). In other words, the process of conscious knowing—attention to experience, understanding, reflection, and responsibility—must be so clearly laid out that the response leaves no more relevant questions unanswered (arrives at a virtually unconditioned response). These two standards are understood in relation to the anthropological aspect of the process and indicate whether an authentic act of the understanding has occurred.

A third factor concerns the theological requirements of method. The theologian must demonstrate that the properly applied set of procedures that constitute her or his method relates theological and religious beliefs to the transformation or authentic self-transcendent that Lonergan describes as "religious

¹ Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, 106.

² Kenneth R. Melchin, *History*, 81.

conversion.” While there is “no way that verification yields results that are universally convincing,” they do establish the probability of the conclusions.³

When a process of verification is applied to the findings of moral theology, one cannot achieve total certainty. Traditionally, Catholic ethics recognized this in its acceptance of probabilism.⁴ Verification, likewise, cannot establish an exclusive definition of the good. As Lonergan comments: “if one attempts to define the good, one runs the risk of misleading one’s readers.”⁵ The recognition of the good is an emergent, *a posteriori* event. It is a response to a “question for deliberation [that] demands empirical facts [but] is not answered by them. Questions for deliberation intend future [unknown] prospects, goals, values, and actions that will realize such projects.”⁶ Concern for method, the procedure through which the ethicist grasps moral intelligibility, is at the core of the analysis that follows. How does Curran perform each of the intellectual operations that he has identified in his methodological proposal? This question aims at making the consistency and coherence of his method clear. How thoroughly does he complete all the stages of method? This question relates to the verification of whether, in Curran’s treatment of critical social issues, all the relevant processes for an authentic act of understanding are present and whether the necessary connections have been completed to the theological and religious presuppositions that are foundational for the concerns of moral theology.

This chapter will examine the heuristic that is operative in Curran’s account of social responsibility and his approach to the problematic of individual freedom and the common good. This involves determining both the social and historical locus of responsible action (what Lonergan calls “the anthropological component”) and the religious import of such decisions on the shape of the future of church and society. Christian ethics has to explain the call to conversion and discipleship that is inherent in all life (“the specifically religious component”) in a way that exposes the religious dimension of reality and

³ Ibid., 85.

⁴ See Jonsen, *The Abuse of Casuistry*, 164-75.

⁵ Lonergan, *Method*, 27.

⁶ Melchin, *History*, 83; see Lonergan, *Method*, 27-55.

relate the emergent structure of history and the progress or decline of human society to the transcendent ideal of the kingdom of God.⁷

The first part of the chapter looks at Curran's interventions in the discussion of the church's political move to ban abortion. The essays examined deal with public law and morality. Curran begins with the premise of the right of freedom of conscience in civil society, arguing that the church's concern for the unborn must be directed away from a model of force to one of freedom. The second part of the chapter analyzes Curran's views on the relationship of "religious ethical inquiry to economic policy."⁸ To simply summarize Curran's theoretical requirements cannot provide an adequate assessment of his method. The measure of his contribution requires an examination of the pattern of learning, the logic of discovery that he follows in his inquiries into several different social issues of urgent concern to American society and to the world.

In seeking concrete ways for the church to affirm and develop its positive relationship with the world, Vatican II examines several important areas: marriage and the family, fostering of culture, the political community, economic and social life, fostering a community of nations and peace. The problems occurring in these areas deeply affect the human race. Solutions must be sought in the light of both of the gospel and of human experience.⁹ Curran's writings on social ethics reflect the council's concerns.

A. Context: Church, state, and the common good.

Curran's essays on civil and economic freedom and Catholic social ethics express a keen consciousness of the historical changes that have occurred in the practical reality of the state and its relationship to the church since the Enlightenment. Both the church's and state's scope of responsibility for the common good has significantly been altered by the reality of civil society and the liberties that accompany it. Nevertheless, he notes elements of the Catholic tradition that illustrate the need for constant, yet flexible, moral oversight of state and society, for example, the principles of subsidiarity (Pius XI) and socialization (John XXIII) establish the conditions for human flourishing. Vatican II, although unable to

⁷ Lonergan, *Method*, 25.

⁸ Curran, *Toward an American*, 174.

⁹ *Gaudium et Spes*, part II, *Vatican II*, 948-1001

spell out in detail the relationship the church desired to have with the world, expressed confidence that its meaning would be discovered in a dialogue based on “the dignity of the human person, the community of mankind, and the significance of human activity.”¹⁰

In his essays on the relationship of ethics and public policy, Curran deconstructs some of the presuppositions that still leave the impression that the common good is a responsibility that is jointly shared by church and the state. Since he concentrates on the United States in his writing, the “closer bonds of human interdependence and their spread over the whole world”¹¹ that widen the meaning and the role of the common good and redefines responsibility for it are, unfortunately, not considered. By exposing the illegitimacy of the old church-state paradigm, Curran raises the critical question of the church’s relation to civil and political society. J. Leon Hooper, in his detailed study of John C. Murray’s social philosophy, incisively notes that there is an intricate and complex web of relationships between the state, church, social morality, and the general public. From this web of relationships emerges a question that would seem to claim a central place in a relation-response ethical model: If “society is the moral center of the temporal order, through which that order comes to self-definition, and by which it adjusts to social, economic, and political changes,” then what are the developmental dynamics by which society comes to that self- and moral-consciousness that can effectively transform unjust social realities?¹² The absence of a more substantive discussion of civil society leaves Curran’s construct of church-world relationships and responsibility for the common good incomplete.

The common good has always been important in the Roman Catholic tradition and remains an essential element of a credible social ethics. It stands to reason that a society has to have some purpose and the state some responsibility for supporting that purpose. It is relatively easy to see that when the good of a few becomes detrimental to the welfare of the whole community, there is something wrong. There is, however, little agreement over the meaning of the common good and questions abound as to whether there is, in the United States, sufficient harmony, shared language or shared purpose to achieve such a consensus.

¹⁰ *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 40, *Vatican II*, 939.

¹¹ *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 26, *Vatican II*, 927.

¹² Hooper, *The Ethics of Discourse*, 81.

Nevertheless, “the debate about the meaning and utility of the concept of the common good is [again] unfolding on a number of levels in contemporary intellectual life.”¹³

Public discourse on the common good is often viewed with skepticism about the desirability and viability of elaborating and committing to living out an understanding of the common good.¹⁴ Although a rhetorical and religious tradition of community and unity still inspires Americans, their culture stands firmly in the practical tradition of “all those economic and social institutions characteristic of modernity that set the individual free from past social bonds and that were provided with theoretical warrants by thinkers such as John Locke and Adam Smith.”¹⁵ Whatever may be the difficulties in creating this conversation, the serious problems in public life make it a central concern of Catholic social ethics to foster and enrich that debate.

The common good is not just an ideal construct; it is a matter that “concerns the most fundamental bases of economic, social, and political institutions, as well as the deepest core of cultural and intellectual life.”¹⁶ Alasdair MacIntyre, arguing that agreement on a catalogue of virtues and the common good, on their content and character as a necessary basis for political community, underscores the enormous challenge to social ethics that the question of the common good poses.

Modern systematic politics, whether liberal, conservative, radical, or socialist, simply has to be rejected from a standpoint that owes genuine allegiance to the tradition of the virtues; for modern politics itself expresses in its institutional forms a systematic rejection of that tradition.¹⁷

Curran’s approach to the common good, while not pessimistic, is cautious. He rejects contractarian theories of state and society, stressing both the positive and negative grounding of the social nature of human beings. It follows from this that the purpose or end of society is the “common good,” which includes not only “the various spiritual and religious goods existing within society but above all involves the ordered relationships existing in society.”¹⁸ Society has a meaning, significance and reality that

¹³ David Hollenbach, “The Common Good Revisited,” *Theological Studies* 50 (1989): 70.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 78.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 72.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 78.

¹⁷ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2d. ed. (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 255.

¹⁸ Curran, *Transition and Tradition*, 149.

are greater than the aggregate of its individual parts, which Curran looks for in “ordered [social] relationships.”

Curran regards the traditional construct of natural law to be a closed system that depends on the unequivocal acknowledgement of a divine source and guarantor of a morally obliging order. This classicist view limits thinking about social progress and creativity to the potentiality inherent in the nature of society. A natural law stance that regards society and the state as natural and organic realities (participating in the social nature of the human being) tends to be restorative. It aims at regaining a lost harmony or order, rather than fostering creativity and change.¹⁹ Curran, however, is committed to a natural law basis of morality reinterpreted in a historically conscious, personalist, and relational manner, and mediated in the light of the Christian revelation. According to Edward Malloy, Curran perceives natural law as “a God-given destiny that can only be worked out experientially and reflectively.”²⁰ Natural law functions as a heuristic, guiding the historical process of moral discernment.

Curran’s proposed ethical model (relationality-responsibility), rooted in the ontological reality of human existence (as temporal, social and emergent) seems particularly suited for discussions of the common good. His conviction that morality is intrinsic, objective, and realistic offers hope of finding a language that will facilitate discussion of public moral goods. Christian faith has several symbols that give religious meaning to a relation-response model of the common good. What in humanistic terms may be described as human flourishing, fully human, or transcendental humanism can be religiously understood through biblical images of the covenant between God and Israel and of the kingdom of God. While neither can become a perfect reality within human history, they serve as ideals to strive for and as measures against which to judge any human structure and unmask its claim to absoluteness. However, the Judaeo-Christian scriptures cannot provide any normative content to these images,²¹ because of what Curran calls (as earlier

¹⁹ Curran, *A New Look*, 234.

²⁰ Malloy, “Ethics of Responsibility,” 27.

²¹ This statement is to be understood as pertaining to the material content of ethics. Curran holds that no specific, material norms can be taken from the Scriptures and be applied as binding on Christian behaviour today, except insofar as they can be rationally known by non-believers, without the light of faith. His argument has four parts: (1) faith and scripture do not affect the material content of Christian ethics; (2) the normative, material content of Christian ethics is no different from what is ethically required of all others; (3) what normative material content from the scriptures may be still binding on Christians today is,

shown) the “hermeneutical problem.” In the absence of concrete meaning for kingdom and covenant terminology, Curran understands “ordered relationships within society” to mean that freedom, truth, love, and justice are the building blocks of a just society; and that a just society is one in which the dignity and freedom of the individual are recognized, especially in the aspirations toward participation and equality. This approach follows from the logic of a morality that is a dynamic process of growth and change. Consequently, working for the common good takes place in relation to particular issues. The broader social debate, envisioned by Hollenbach, cannot be carried on in general, in Curran’s approach, but only in terms of particular issues, the clashes of rights, and interpretations of justice.²² If MacIntyre is correct in concluding that “the nature of any society ... is not to be deciphered from its laws alone, but from those understood as an index of its conflicts,”²³ then there is no real public discussion on the common good in the disputes over a mish-mash of moral thoughts and fragments, disembodied from their meaning-giving traditions. The common good warrants an independent discussion in an attempt to name and claim one’s society.

Jacques Maritain, whose societal views Curran claims to support, states:

The common good of the city or civilization does not preserve its true nature unless it respects that which surpasses it, unless it is subordinated...to the order of eternal goods and supra-temporal models from which human life is suspended.”²⁴

Christian social ethics can function as a bridge builder between the Christian symbols, images, virtues, and attitudes and the world of shared human experience. “Christians as citizens of both cities”²⁵ are always particular persons and communities of a particular society, culture, language, and worldview. Faith and culture (or society) influence each other mutually. Moral theology helps the church discern what is happening and what might happen in this world, insofar as events, situations, structures, and possibilities

in principle, open to and known by all human beings; (4) the normative material content of Christian ethics, like all ethics, is autonomous in the sense that it can stand on its own, apart from the contribution of the scriptures and faith. He concludes: “Supporters of an autonomous morality see the contribution of the scriptures and of faith in terms of *parenthesis* as distinguished from normative ethics.” Curran, *American Catholic Moral Theology*, 52-64, quote from 58.

²² Curran, *Transition and Tradition*, 150.

²³ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 254.

²⁴ Jacques Maritain, *The Person and the Common Good* (1947), quoted in Brian Stiltner, *Religion and the Common Good: Catholic Contributions to Building Community in a Liberal Society* Lanam, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1999), 96.

²⁵ *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 43, *Vatican II*, 943.

advance the acceptance of the gospel (or what Maritain calls “the order of eternal good”) or hinder its reception. Curran identifies this discernment process with the Roman Catholic theology of mediation,²⁶ with the result that movement toward the common good (enacted in particular choices and actions) can be theologically portrayed as “Christ transforming culture.” Although Curran’s primary purpose is to analyze the methodology of approaches to these questions found both in the tradition and theology of the Catholic Church, it must be noted ahead of time, that there is little evidence in his essays of the four-step hermeneutic of his own methodological approach.

B. Public morality and freedom: abortion and the law.

The relation of law and morality forms a critical baseline for the discussion of social ethics and (for the church in the United States) the question of abortion has special significance in this discussion. The public debate, so often construed as the defense of life versus the freedom of choice, challenges the church to work out a social-ethical understanding of what Herman-Josef Grosse Kracht describes as its desire to go along, in an unthreatened and unthreatening manner, with the freedoms and rights, democratic values and life styles of modernity.²⁷ After *Roe v. Wade*, the American Roman Catholic hierarchy strongly supported a constitutional amendment to ban abortions. Official Roman Catholic teaching uncompromisingly condemns abortion and, by extension, any social policies that facilitate or permit it.²⁸ American Catholics faced a question of conscience: can one be a good Catholic and not work actively for constitutional change to ban abortion? How a Catholic and how the church respond to laws, which they consider to be immoral, becomes a defining event in how the church understands itself in relation to the world.

²⁶ Curran *passim*. The question of mediation becomes central to a fair evaluation of Curran’s contribution to moral theology, because it is at the core of what he means by interpreting human reality from a Christian perspective: nature as historical and as permeated by the five-fold Christian mysteries. Curran understands mediation in the sense that it is used in Thomas Aquinas and the scholastic tradition, as analogous knowledge of God. Carried over to moral theology, Curran uses mediation in the sense of the analogous knowledge of God’s moral will. If there is no direct human knowing of God or God’s intentions, then human beings can only know God indirectly through created reality.

²⁷ Grosse Kracht, 214.

²⁸ See “Declaration on Procured Abortion,” Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (Vatican City: Vatican Polyclot Press, 1974).

1. Curran's Argument based on the limits of the constitutional state. Curran works out the relation of the individual to society primarily in terms of freedom of conscience, as articulated in the Vatican II declaration *Dignitatis Humanae*. Freedom, because it is both a Christian and a cultural value, is capable of serving as a mediating principle that makes clear to the Christian the meaning of the gospel in a complex social situation and affirms the possibility of recognizing signs of God's presence in the world. Curran arrives at a conclusion that casts doubt on both the benefit and the justice of a constitutional amendment banning abortion. Although he defends the right of the church to influence legislation and provides several examples of some of the church's proposals that have received positive ecumenical and general political acceptance,²⁹ Curran insists that not every intrusion of the church in public policy is appropriate.

a. The state in the classicist paradigm. Curran begins with an examination of the sources of the notion that the Church must ensure that civil law reflects Christian morality.³⁰ He takes a historical approach, naming and critiquing the paradigm within which legislation and morality are joined. In the classicist natural law understanding the state was understood as responsible for the common good. Those who governed were expected to insure that laws represented good legislation, that is, in harmony with natural law and divine law. While church and state are separate and autonomous societies, the church can intervene when the state fails in its responsibility to be an ethical-state.

In this paradigm human society follows a hierarchical ordering, in which the temporal order is subordinated to the spiritual. The individual's spiritual purpose, union with God, is to be served by civil laws and the state's temporal governance. Although the state cannot be responsible for the spiritual union of its subjects with God, it should direct and dispose them toward this end by governing as an "orthodox state"(one that governs in harmony with the laws of God).³¹ The objectification of the state, the common good, and truth leave little room for or comprehension of individual rights based on the dignity of the

²⁹ Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, 131.

³⁰ Charles E. Curran, "Abortion: Its Legal and Moral Aspects in Catholic Theology," *New Perspectives in Moral Theology* (Notre Dame, Ind.: Fides Publishers, 1974), 163-93; "Civil Law and Christian Morality: Abortion and the Churches," *Ongoing Revision in Moral Theology* (Notre Dame, Ind.: Fides Publishers, 1975), 107-43; "The Difference between Personal Morality and Public Policy," *Toward an American Catholic Moral Theology* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987), 194-202.

³¹ Curran, *Ongoing Revision*, 112.

person. Indeed, the state and the individual function in mutual harmony within an organic whole, which is society. In this paradigm, the ends of the individual (one's own good) and the ends of justice (the common good) cannot be in contradiction. Temporal government has the moral responsibility to rule well and the moral authority to make laws that insure that people do what by nature they are meant to do and that society achieves the ends that will lead to human flourishing. Curran notes that, "according to Aquinas, political authority merely directs human beings to do what by nature they should do and thus constitutes no violation of their freedom."³² Thus, "human law is really only an extension of natural law."³³

The paternalistic understanding of law and society, along with its ontological association of human freedom and human nature, Curran observes, "has important ramifications for problems raised between law and individual freedom."³⁴ It implies a duty of the state to direct its constituents by law and, when necessary, by coercion, toward achieving both the good of the individual and the common good (understood in terms of human nature, its supernatural end, and the hierarchical ordering of creation according to an eternal plan of God).

The operational factor in this paradigm is a divine ordering of nature and, deduced from that order, a concept of state that has a responsibility to insure that civil laws reflect natural law morality. From this paradigm of state and law Christians deduce their obligation to work against legislation that permits immorality.³⁵

b. Law and morality in a revised natural law approach. Curran offers a revised understanding of natural law that no longer views the state as part of a divine plan that brings other forms of social life under its all encompassing umbrella. This concurs, he believes, with "the underlying changes in the basic understanding of the role and function of the state," that emerged from Vatican II.³⁶ Catholic teaching now deals with the state as it is and functions in the world. It is a matter of fact that the state is a human construct, which lacks the authority to suppress human freedom. The basic principle of a free society (in

³² Curran, *Ongoing Revision*, 118.

³³ Curran, *New Perspectives*, 165.

³⁴ Curran, *Ongoing Revision*, 119.

³⁵ This, in fact, was the reasoning of the church in opposing legislation that decriminalized the use or sale of contraceptives or the practice of abortion. See Curran, *Ongoing Revision*, 121-24.

³⁶ Curran, *Ongoing Revision*, 124.

Curran's judgment the most important part of *Dignitatis Humanae*) provides "the fundamental governing criterion in the relationship of civil law and personal morality"³⁷ and transfers responsibility for the common good from government to civil society. The individual is the subject of the political process.

For Curran the rights of conscience embody a broad civil freedom and express a complex insight with enormous political consequences. The Declaration on Religious Liberty is, at the core, a statement about the limits of the state in relation to the freedom of individuals and associations. Curran acknowledges the Council's caution that freedom is subject to the regulatory influence of personal and social responsibility, the moral law, and the common good; but he stresses "the principle of the integrity of freedom in society. According to this principle, man's freedom should be given the fullest possible recognition and should not be curtailed except when and in so far as necessary."³⁸ The state may justify the curtailment of freedom only for the sake of public order.

Three juridical criteria define public order: peace, justice, and public morality. Curran points out that public morality, in this context, does not describe a body of ethical norms or "an agreement on all specifics of morality but rather is the basic shared morality which is necessary for the people to live together in society."³⁹ These three criteria constitute the framework for a proper understanding of the relationship between law and morality within a revised natural law understanding. Therefore, public law has a pragmatic aspect: a "good" law does not refer to its moral content, but indicates one that is feasible, equitable, enforceable, and contributes to the overall purpose of law.⁴⁰ Human rights replace the divine ordering of society as the "primary way" of addressing social issues in Catholic social ethics today.⁴¹ *c. The criterion of political purpose.*⁴² In Curran's revised natural law approach, human rights become the primary way for resolving conflicts between the common good and individual freedom. Theoretically, the common good and the individual good do not contradict each other. In the older paradigm, the relationship

³⁷ Curran, *Ongoing Revision*, 130.

³⁸ *Dignitatis Humanae*, n. 7, *Vatican II*, 804-805; see also *Dignitatis Humanae*, n.1-3, and *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 26, *Vatican II*, 799-802, 927.

³⁹ Curran, *Ongoing Revision*, 131-32.

⁴⁰ Curran, *Ongoing Revision*, 133.

⁴¹ Curran, "Churches and Human Rights: From Hostility/Reluctance to Acceptability," *Milltown Studies* 42 (Winter 1998): 40.

⁴² Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, 140-41.

between the two was worked out by the just law criterion, which allowed little room for freedom, individuality, or dissent. In Curran's revised approach, human rights provide the empirical basis for inductive moral reasoning. The classicist ethics justified reform on the basis of society's purpose; a historicist ethics is guided by the criterion of democratic participation in decisions affecting state and society.

Curran works with a notion of constitutional state and its primary (and limiting) duty to maintain public order. He insists, therefore, that attempts to influence public policy be carried out within the context of the moral and religious neutrality of the state. As a result, the criterion for resolving conflicts between society and the individual and for distinguishing between the legitimate and illegitimate "ways in which religion and churches might influence government and legislation" is that of "a truly political purpose." Such a purpose exists when the desired legislation corresponds "concretely...[to] a demand of the public order with its threefold aspects of justice, of public morality, and of peace."⁴³ Curran refutes the claim that Catholics have a moral obligation to advocate for laws against abortion on the basis that such a laws do not serve a "truly political purpose." Moreover, he opposes "a constitutional amendment to restrict abortions legally because I give great weight to the first principle of political purpose which in the midst of public disagreement establishes a presumption in favor of no coercion."⁴⁴

Curran's opinion reflects a *de facto* situation in which the rights of persons have displaced the rights of truth, including moral truth, in the order of practice.⁴⁵ Curran does not view this situation as entirely negative and refers to papal *magisterium*, which argues that the rapid and profound changes that have occurred in the world make this displacement of responsibility imperative and forces the church to relearn what it means to be human and to rethink the meaning of personal existence and survival.⁴⁶

d. Individual rights as a condition of a just society. If responsibility for what happens in society is transferred, in modern political thought, from the rulers to the members of society, this underscores the church's "growing conviction of mankind's ability and duty to strengthen its mastery over nature and of the

⁴³ Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, 140.

⁴⁴ Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, 130-34.

⁴⁵ Charles E. Curran, "Churches and Human Rights," 40.

⁴⁶ Curran, *Tensions*, 169; see Paul VI, *Octogesimo Anno*, n. 7

need to establish a political, social, and economic order at the service of man to assert and develop the dignity proper to individuals and societies.”⁴⁷ This power is to be accompanied by increased responsibility to work together for that social, economic, and political order described as the “common good.”⁴⁸

Curran’s high regard for human freedom as an essential condition for the exercise of responsibility and for the success of civil society accords with this ecclesial attitude. The transfer of responsibility for the good of society to the people creates a principle whereby “each person must discern in one’s conscience the actions that he or she is called to share in.”⁴⁹ The state, then, becomes the concretization of the subjective and democratic will of the people. From this Curran concludes that individual freedom is not simply a civil right, but an ethical value.

e. The common good: Balancing rights and claims. Ethical reflection on human rights must do justice to their social dimension and steer a balanced course between the extremes of individualism and socialism.⁵⁰ Although “universal [human] rights are ontologically grounded in the human person,” living in a historical-social matrix of relationships, human rights and civil liberties require the stable civil and juridical structures that allow them to flourish.⁵¹ A right and its social situation are two sides of the same coin. Curran insists that the “common good,” by definition, must also foster the dignity and freedom of the individual. The state promotes justice and true freedom for all, by maintaining the democratic conditions that promote participation and equality in the public discourse the shapes shared values and their supportive structures. Public order is the proper domain of the state; responsibility for the common good reverts to society as a whole.⁵²

⁴⁷ *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 9, *Vatican II*, 910.

⁴⁸ *Gaudium et Spes*, n.34, n. 74, *Vatican II*, 934, 981.

⁴⁹ Curran, *Tensions*, 170. Here Curran is paraphrasing *Octogesima Anno*, par. 49.

⁵⁰ Curran, *Tensions*, 125.

⁵¹ Charles E. Curran, *Toward an American*, 143; Curran, “Churches and Human Rights,” 47.

⁵² See *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 74 *Vatican II*, 980-1, where the common good is described as ability of “individuals, families and the various groups which make up the civil community....to achieve a fully human life” through their cooperative efforts. The common good is construed dynamically as the process of cooperation as well as “the sum total of all those conditions of social life which enable individuals, families, and organizations to achieve complete and efficacious fulfillment.”

Curran does not suggest that public law is amoral nor does he deny that the church and religion have a role and a right to influence legislation in accord with what is morally meaningful to them.⁵³ Even in an empirical approach, the state has an important social role, especially in areas of social and economic justice. This is especially true in view of the growth and complexity of social agency and the creation of a growing network of mutually dependent associations and organization that become essential for fulfilling even the most basic human needs. Not only must the state provide an oversight previously thought to be unnecessary,⁵⁴ but all citizens have a role to play in seeing that the needs of all are fulfilled in a manner that respects “human dignity and rights [and are included as] part of the common good.”⁵⁵

Thus far, Curran provides a reasonable description of a changing factual reality. He points out how the theological tradition of the common good developed out of a medieval metaphysical grounding that does not correspond to the modern mentality. He raises the problem of reconciling the “the recognition that human beings are by nature social and civil society is basically good...[to] the growing emphasis on freedom, equality, and rights.”⁵⁶ He reiterates that debating and shaping the common good is not a process that begins from scratch but is historically and culturally situated. As a result, it is not surprising that the “common good” serves Curran as a guide in formulating a response to problems that are institutionally and structurally embedded in society. As we respond to various issues, we are compelled to redefine the concrete content of the common good,⁵⁷ a task that is further complicated by the conflictual aspect of society.⁵⁸ Working out the common good involves continuously revisiting *the meaning of the human* in a dialectic process of reconciling or repudiating conflicting social values and structures.

Curran subscribes to the “fundamental position in official Catholic social teaching,” in whose view society is understood with an “emphasis on people called to live in a community that seeks the common good that flows back to the good of the individuals.” It is a harmonious view that differs from the

⁵³ Curran, *New Perspectives*, 167.

⁵⁴ Curran, *Ongoing Revision*, 128; see John XXIII, *Mater et Magistra*, nn. 59-67, *Justice in the Marketplace*, 116-118

⁵⁵ Curran, *Tensions*, 127.

⁵⁶ Curran, *Tensions*, 135.

⁵⁷ Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, 161.

⁵⁸ Curran, *Tensions*, 133.

tradition mostly by the “recognition of democracy, freedom, and human rights.”⁵⁹ Thus, in Curran’s approach, the common good might best be described as process (civil society in mutual and respectful dialogue) rather than content.

Curran’s preference for understanding the common good as process can be clarified by revisiting his discussion of Alinsky’s community organization strategies,⁶⁰ where Curran describes democracy as “the best means of achieving the values proposed by the Judaeo-Christian and the democratic political traditions—equality, justice, freedom, peace, and the preciousness of human life with its basic rights.”⁶¹ In navigating a sea of conflicting interests, opposing values, uneven and often self-serving powers, the common good is affirmed by guaranteeing fair play. In the historical reality of an imperfect and sinful world, the common good will not ordinarily enjoy the favor of consensus, the clarity of definition, or a harmonious and orderly means of attainment. It will be realized provisionally and partially in “a dialectical rhythm of conflict and compromise.”⁶² The common good is present as a balance between the freedom of the individual and the needs of society to foster that freedom. It is a balance that is achieved through social, political, and conflictual tactics. Curran’s confidence in freedom as a value, his “ultimate faith in the people,” and trust in the processes of true democracy is essential to properly understanding his treatment of the common good.⁶³

2. Curran’s conclusion: Anti-abortion legislation lacks a truly political purpose. In attempting to help the Roman Catholic community reflect on its possible positions in the abortion debate, Curran offers guidelines for the church’s response to what it may perceive as an immoral society. To lobby for constitutional amendments that forbid abortion is not in accord with the best traditions of Roman Catholic ethics, he argues, and suggests that the church create an understanding and support for its teachings “through education, service and other means.”⁶⁴ In this discussion, Curran does not make use of his methodology

⁵⁹ Curran, *The Living Tradition*, 75.

⁶⁰ Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, 147-175.

⁶¹ Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, 165.

⁶² Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, 163.

⁶³ Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, 161.

⁶⁴ Curran, *Ongoing Revision*, 143.

(other than to demonstrate the critical importance of historical consciousness in proclaiming moral principles).

Curran uses a participatory theory of democratic practice as the most realistic approach to understanding the common good and resolving conflicts between that and individual freedom. He argues that in the absence of a public, social consensus on the beginning of life and in view of the perceived rights of those who place greater value on the maternal life than that of the fetus, the moral appropriateness of a law banning abortion is questionable. Experience has already demonstrated the impossibility of enforcing such a law and the current debate suggests that it would be equally impossible to arrive at a consensus as to the content of such a law. Moreover, since access to safe abortion, where it is illegal, would favor the rich, such a law would also be discriminatory.

In such a context, Curran contends, the conditions for limiting the exercise of individual freedom are not met. In fact, the disregard for law and the inequity of its consequences would work against public order and justice. Curran offers an opinion that would prefer an option of accommodation, which restricts abortion and reduces the number of conflict situations. "The important thing to recognize is that the difference between civil law and personal morality means that one can truly be convinced that abortion is morally wrong, but still support legislation that allows abortion."⁶⁵

Curran's assumption that abortion is a matter of "personal morality," however, needs to be challenged. His discussion has not touched on any of the social values that abortion legislation involves, for example: the social value of life, parenthood, the transmission of life, or the technological bias implied in abortion as a response to a human problem. All of these are also part of judging what is happening and finding alternatives to a primarily coercive and legalistic approach.

C. The Economy: distributive justice and economic rights

The question of the economy, specified and particularized in the economic ethos of the United States, provides another testing ground for the new understanding of "the relationship between the church

⁶⁵ Curran, *Ongoing Revision*, 136.

and the world and the dialogue between them.”⁶⁶ Thus, the economy offers an opportunity for moral theology to identify and promote ways that facilitate the church’s cooperation with others of good will.⁶⁷

1. Vatican II: The economy as a basis for discussing church-world relationship. The Pastoral Constitution on the Church links economic issues with the human responsibility to build the kind of society that affirms “the dignity and the entire vocation of the human person and the welfare of society as a whole.”⁶⁸ The Council understands the economy as a human capacity and responsibility to meet the needs of the human family. A moral economy is one that is “carried out in accordance with the techniques and methods belonging to the moral order, so that God’s design for man may be fulfilled.”⁶⁹ The pastoral constitution views the economy in terms of human relationships. The human experience of economic relationships is both hopeful and bleak: optimism engendered by constantly improving means of production, distribution, productivity, and services, but also despair and anger at the decline of the standard of living of the poor and underprivileged. The Council attempts to assess the situation “in the light of the Gospel principles of justice and equity demanded by right reason for individual and social life and also for international relations”⁷⁰ and, in this way, to discern “the signs of the time.”

The economic question has been central to the modern tradition of Roman Catholic social teaching. The role of the state, the rights of workers, the priority of a just wage and decent living conditions, the requirements of international development and their link with social justice are constant themes. In *Gaudium et Spes* the church takes issue with a model of economic progress that does little to reduce social inequities and, in fact, poses a threat to world peace. The Council’s voice is not pessimistic, but it recognizes the need for “much reform in economic and social life...along with a change of mentality and attitude of all men.”⁷¹

The reforms needed are within the reach of human choice. Christian revelation clarifies and specifies for rational consciousness the negative impact of the structures and attitudes that prolong this

⁶⁶ *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 40, *Vatican II*, 939.

⁶⁷ *Gaudium et Spes*, nn. 42-45, *Vatican II*, 940-47.

⁶⁸ *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 63, *Vatican II*, 968.

⁶⁹ *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 64, *Vatican II*, 970.

⁷⁰ *Gaudium et Spes*, Part II, chapter 3, *Vatican II*, 968-79.

⁷¹ *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 63, *Vatican II*, 968.

situation, which is unacceptable to the most basic understanding of human nature. Justice and equity are integral to the biblical vision of economic reality. The separation of economic needs from other social and human needs, commodification of labor, limiting economic decision making to an elite few, and the disproportionate distribution of created things are repudiated by Christian revelation.

Throughout the council's discussion there are underlying themes of the common good, the community as a whole, the relationships and responsibilities between people, groups of people, the state, and the human family. The dynamic process of change is apparent in concepts such as the divine destiny of the earth, economic progress, and building the future. These themes and concepts call for active and effective engagement for social and economic progress and in the struggle to bring greater justice and equity into the real relations that exist among people. The mark of successful economic reform is sought in an economic situation in which prosperity effectively contributes to greater mutual understanding and peace in the world. The Council does not identify these initiatives with the kingdom of God, but indicates that by seeking the kingdom of God "first" and finding inspiration in the spirit of the beatitudes, especially poverty, the Christian will be stronger and more effective in achieving these aims.⁷² Two significant claims emerge from this teaching. First, the symbols of the kingdom of God and the Sermon on the Mount link vision and virtue to each other. Second, economic and social life are related intrinsically through the dignity of the person, the transcendent vocation of human life, and the welfare of society.

Ethical reflection that builds on and advances the Council's social teaching must work within a horizon that can support the dispositions, attitudes, and motivation necessary for engaging in the economic reform. It must also have the conceptual and creative tools for concretizing the image of the kingdom in terms of the social reality that can emerge out of the possibilities that now exist. Christian social ethics will take the risk of particularity and concreteness that can be justified and critiqued only through dialogue with other sources of technical and professional knowledge and moral wisdom. The process for bringing together issues of the transcendent common good and the temporal common good requires ethical economic planning and informed, active participation of all, especially those most marginalized by the

⁷² *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 72, *Vatican II*, 979.

present economic ethos and structures. This, in turn, implies a politically open process that can effect changes in legislation, systems, and institutions.

Hans-Josef Grosse Kracht, commenting on the tasks involved in the church's partnership with the world, highlights the need for an effective means of dialogue. The requirements for communicating an essentially religious message to a pluralistic and secular society shatter the old paradigms of state and church relations and force the church to explore what it means to be a pilgrim people, distinct from the world and society, yet an integral part of both. The church must also come to terms with the reality of democratic government and of a state that does not exercise its power and authority on any religious or metaphysical basis. Nor does the state have a mandate to direct the lives of its citizens toward the accomplishment of a common good implanted in human nature and the world by God at its creation. This reality raises the question of how to communicate meanings and values that are not necessarily shared by society or by present economic systems.⁷³

Aware of this problem, Curran points out that the Roman Catholic tradition has recourse to the concept and content of natural law to speak effectively to society-at-large. At the same time, he questions whether natural law's basic notions and values can "exist without all [their] Thomistic metaphysical grounding."⁷⁴ In his essays on the economy Curran responds that the natural law language, if understood historically, has an important function in contemporary ethical dialogue. A central thesis for Curran is that "the principles and approach of Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274) still play an important role in contemporary Catholic social thought and teaching."⁷⁵

1. Curran's argument: the connection between economic democracy and distributive justice.

a. General principles. In 1986 the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops published a pastoral statement on the U.S. economy.⁷⁶ Curran sets out to provide a background for understanding and

⁷³ Grosse Kracht, 233-36.

⁷⁴ Curran, *Tensions*, 135.

⁷⁵ Curran, *Tensions*, 110.

⁷⁶ *Economic Justice For All: Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy* (Washington, D.C.: National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1986). Curran's views are set out in two articles: "An Analysis of the United States Bishops' Pastoral Letter on the Economy," *Toward an American*, 174-193; "Ethical Principles of Catholic Social Teaching Behind the United States Bishops' Letter on the Economy," *Tensions*, 87-109.

interpreting the bishops' message and shows its connection with "the most important elements of the [Church's social] teaching."⁷⁷ Curran identifies several aspects of the church's social ethics tradition that appear in the letter: (1) human beings are social by nature and the state is a natural society, whose "end...is the common good, but the common good ultimately redounds to the good of all;"⁷⁸ (2) the role of the state is guided by the principle of subsidiarity (as a corrective to over-centralization) and that of socialization (which allows necessary power to the state for regulating the increasingly complex and necessary interdependence in meeting basic human needs in society); (3) the key value that should govern social life is justice (commutative, distributive, and legal or social justice); (4) human rights include economic rights; (5) property always includes social responsibility; (6) a preferential option for the poor recognizes the special consideration given them by the gospel.

Curran observes that the stress on economic rights and the principle of socialization are newer developments in that tradition and that the preferential option for the poor reflects a biblical, theological dimension of social responsibility. He also draws attention to the bishops' incorporation of "a comparatively new concept into social justice—the concept of participation."⁷⁹ This innovation reflects the reality of modern society. Social justice, which governs the relationship of the individual to the common good, was the responsibility of the state, enacted just laws, and determined which public projects were of social value. Modernity's "recognition of the freedom and dignity of the person...calls for greater participation of the individual in the life of society and in determining one's own life." Society and its members, therefore, have a duty "to recognize and facilitate the right of participation," especially of the poor and marginalized, in determining the kind of economy they will live in.⁸⁰ Curran remarks that the older account of social justice emphasized the common good and spoke little of individual rights.

The general approach of the bishops affirms and incorporates the key elements of the church's social ethical tradition. Their message makes a unique contribution to those teachings by its emphasis on

⁷⁷ Curran, *Tensions*, 110, 117-18.

⁷⁸ Curran, *Tensions*, 111.

⁷⁹ Curran, *Tensions*, 115.

⁸⁰ Curran, *Tensions*, 115. Curran is working here within an empirical ethical paradigm, viewing economic justice in terms of the democratic, political process that is operative in the United States. Thus, the individual's right to participate in setting economic policies and guidelines that determine economic fairness is exercised through the democratic process.

participation as a constitutive part of social justice. Curran interprets this as a serious criticism of the American emphasis on commutative justice and economic individualism. However, in general it remains within the gradualist, reforming approach that calls for modifications of the system rather than its overthrow.

Curran raises no questions about these principles or the Thomistic worldview that spawned them, although his review of the pre-Vatican II papal tradition found that the older natural law approach stifled change and favored the *status quo*. Neither does Curran pay much attention to the apparent lack of theological meaning in the traditional principles, although this concern was at the core of his criticism of Ryan and Murray. He does, however, find some unresolved issues in *Economic Justice For All*, which he attributes to the bishops' theological presuppositions.⁸¹ The bishops, in Curran's mind, have not integrated a theology of sin in their analysis. This makes their teaching less able to deal with the reality of conflict and competition in the economic ethos of the United States and, more importantly, leaves them out of position to offer a positive ethical appraisal of the use of power and conflict to achieve just social ends.

b. Mediation principles guide moral reasoning. Since Vatican II, the Catholic Church has appealed to the integration of the gospel and faith to daily life as the impulse for its involvement with social and economic questions. For the gospel to penetrate every aspect of human experience it must become incarnate in the complex structures and institutions that are part of economic life.⁸² Curran calls this process mediation. Mediation depends heavily on factual knowledge ("on the complex data and the scientific theories involved") and an ethical evaluation of the data involved, so that "the final decision is truly a Christian, human and ethical decision and not [based] merely on a [scientific] judgment."⁸³ Working for social justice is constitutive of preaching the gospel and redeeming the world. It creates a mutual relationship between grace and material conditions of life. To mediate, in this sense, requires finding a way to recognize the values that are part of the Catholic faith tradition in the language and structures of social-economic reality.

In addressing a double audience in a single language intelligible to both groups the bishops are involved in the process of mediation. Both audiences (the members of their Church and all citizens and

⁸¹ Curran, *Toward an American*, 191-93.

⁸² Curran, *Toward an American*, 177.

⁸³ Curran, *Toward an American*, 178.

policy makers) live within a single moral order and are acted upon by the same social-historical events and occurrences. The moral sensitivity of faith adds nothing more to moral responsibility for human living than is already there. The warrants for the bishops' economic-ethical interpretations and judgments appeal not to religious faith exclusively, but to human reason. Christian ethical judgments can and must be mediated by principles and values accessible to both faith and reason.

Curran adds that the Catholic worldview, especially in its eschatological dimension (which stresses that the kingdom can never be identical with any human reality) supports the need to mediate faith-based values through rational categories and exemplary action. Bringing economic reality in line with the requirements of the kingdom can only be a gradual, pragmatic, and reforming activity. Ordinarily, the Catholic tradition eschews radical attempts or demands of reform.⁸⁴

The complexity of economic reality and its distance from the core of the gospel results also in the absence of certitude in solutions to economic ills that are proposed by faith or theological ethics. With this mindset, Curran observes that although the bishops' proposals are "true and consistent with the gospel," they "cannot claim...to be the only possible gospel-inspired answer."⁸⁵ Few will doubt the validity of this observation, but one looks in vain here for any criteria for determining which proposals might be more and which less "true and consistent with the gospel." Because the church is involved in dialogue with the world, it makes use of principles and values that can be accepted by all partners to the dialogue.⁸⁶ The church, Curran notes, has a universal mission, calls all to belong, and is open to all peoples, cultures, and continents. It may not choose "sectarian" strategies in social matters, defining itself in terms of opposition to culture, but "must recognize pluralism and diversity on a number of levels" and engage in a "wide-ranging dialogue ...with all those who might have something to contribute" to the ethical discussion.⁸⁷

c. Curran's criticism of the bishops' methodology. Curran begins his criticism with the stance of the letter--a theological perspective built "exclusively on the basis of Scripture," with its emphasis on creation, covenant, saving history, and the biblical values, ideals, and goals that should influence human economic

⁸⁴ Curran, *Toward an American*, 180.

⁸⁵ Curran, *Toward an American*, 182.

⁸⁶ Curran, *Toward an American*, 183.

⁸⁷ Curran, *Toward an American*, 181.

life. Their stance is also too narrow, excluding the biblical witness to sin and human limitation. He proposes, but does not articulate, an ethical horizon that goes “beyond only the biblical to involving the totality of the Christian perspective,” including all sources of Christian ethical wisdom: experience, reason, scripture, and tradition. “I think that the basic perspective should be...systematically developed.”⁸⁸ At the same time, Curran faults the bishops for not incorporating the biblical vision “into the other levels [person, norms, judgment] of ethical discourse” they employ while insisting that, although some scriptural teachings may have “a permanent validity for Christians of all ages,” no biblical teaching may be “proposed as a concrete norm for the economy today.”

The bishops also work with an “underdeveloped” anthropology.⁸⁹ In their discussions of the workplace, “the labor of human hands and minds...[and] the ways persons direct all [their] work toward greater justice,”⁹⁰ the bishops call for and express a vision of “cooperation and consensus building among the diverse agents in our economic life, including the government.”⁹¹ The anthropology implicit in this discussion, Curran says, fails to pay enough “attention to the work that is daily done in the economic sector and the vocation of all Christians working there” and does not demonstrate how the values and principles that mediate Christian economic reform are formative of “the person with all the dispositions, virtues, and attitudes that should characterize the person.”⁹² Curran holds that the bishops should have made more effective use of the principles and norms, which belong to the substance of Catholic social teaching and are an irreplaceable part of the mediation process.

Curran’s studies of *Economic Justice For All* concentrate on “what seem to be the most important principles in the Catholic tradition’s teaching on economic policies and structures—the role of the state, justice, human rights, preferential option for the poor, and the universal destiny of the goods of creation to serve the needs of all.” The common good is not on this list, although in his comments on the role of the state, Curran notes: “The common good is not opposed to but includes the good of the individual person.”⁹³

⁸⁸ Curran, *Toward an American*, 185-86.

⁸⁹ Curran, *Toward An American*, 186.

⁹⁰ *Economic Justice for All*, 49.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 62.

⁹² Curran, *Toward an American*, 186-87.

⁹³ Curran, *Toward an American*, 188.

Curran identifies specific requirements of a historically consciousness interpretation of human experience, but does not demonstrate how the application of his method would have altered the meanings or conclusions of *Economic Justice for All*. In fact, Curran dedicates explicit attention to the different “levels” of ethical discourse, which he enumerates and orders as follows: 1) fundamental perspective, 2) person, 3) principles and norms, and 4) “concrete judgments about economic structures and policies in the light of the principles and other levels of discourse.”⁹⁴ It is particularly telling that Curran has left out the methodological level or step of model (relationality-responsibility) and has inserted (what in his method belongs under the steps of person and/or decision-making) principles and norms as the third level. This move, which creates a new step dedicated to the Catholic tradition, seems to confirm what Curran has suggested in introducing his economic-ethical reflections (to show the relevance of Aquinas’ teaching for today’s problems) and what will later characterize his approach to social ethics as “chastened Thomism.” With reference to the credibility of method, this move is troublesome, however, because it begs the question already raised by Curran about the metaphysical under-girding of Scholasticism in the classicist paradigm.⁹⁵

d. Proportional distributive justice: its meditational importance. Curran expands his discussion of economic democracy to issues of taxation and the allocation of health care resources.⁹⁶ The same pattern of argument prevails--articulating general principles and applying them to particular situations under review. Curran reiterates traditional Catholic understandings of the state, the social nature of the person, and the purpose of the state in the traditional Catholic being the common good of society, and the social destiny of the goods of creation.⁹⁷ In these essays Curran lays out his understanding of mediation more clearly—there is a mutual relationship between knowing the plan of God for society and rationally recognizing how justice can be realized in particular historical situations.

⁹⁴ Curran, *Toward an American*, 183-92.

⁹⁵ See Curran, *Tensions*, 135.

⁹⁶ Charles E. Curran, “Just Taxation in Roman Catholic Tradition,” *Toward an American Catholic Moral Theology*, 93-118; “The Right to Health Care and Distributive Justice,” *Directions in Catholic Social Ethics*, 251-282

⁹⁷ Curran, *Toward an American*, 98-101.

Curran begins with the traditional assumption that justice is the virtue that unifies ethical reflection on the relationships that constitute human society—specifically distributive and legal justice. Curran’s aim is to fill out “the basis for understanding and appreciating what the Catholic tradition brings to a proper understanding of justice” in relation to benefits and burdens of society.⁹⁸ In discussing the role of the state and government in ensuring a just society, Curran underlines the state’s responsibility for the common good and indicates the goals that should guide public policy.

Curran’s argument takes a deductive turn, in apparent contradiction of his methodological preference for an inductive approach.⁹⁹ His ethical framework is organized around the role of the state as a natural society and the common good as its end. He argues from a definition of distributive justice, advancing the claim that proportional distribution of burdens and benefits in society is the critical and meditational value that provides a practical starting point for dialogue and cooperation for economic reform.

Although just taxation has not been discussed widely in the Catholic tradition, Curran examines its social ethics for teachings relevant for developing “a Catholic understanding of tax justice.”¹⁰⁰ In a detailed historical overview he argues: “the obligation to pay taxes comes from the virtue of legal [social] justice.”¹⁰¹ The proportional ability to pay is the ethical criterion that should govern government tax policy. Taxes belong to that part of distributive justice that allocates the cost (burden) of government across the entire population. Taxes should be proportional to one’s ability to bear the burden. Catholic social teaching desires a proportional tax structure. Finally, Curran ties the philosophical principle of social responsibility for the common good with the theological norm of the social destiny of the goods of creation as the warrant for a “social duty to redirect created goods” to ensure that each individual in society has access

⁹⁸ Curran, *Toward an American*, 113.

⁹⁹ In discussing the goals of just taxation, for example, Curran says: “In any possible conflict in my judgement the presumption is always in favor of the demands of distributive justice for a proportionate and progressive tax burden.” Curran, *Toward an American*, 114. His reflections do not begin with an empirical consideration of the relationships within society at the time nor does he question fundamental philosophical and ethical assumptions that are constitutive of how “society” is defined and functions in the United States. Instead, Curran begins with a theory of society, grounded in the classicist version of natural law, within which it makes sense that “justice” is the master value in social ethics.

¹⁰⁰ Curran, *Toward an American*, 98.

¹⁰¹ Curran, *Toward an American*, 112.

commensurate with the “measure of external goods which is necessary for living a basically decent human life.”¹⁰² The state’s responsibility for the pursuit of the common good justifies its need to collect taxes and its obligation to spend public monies on improving the economic and social orders.

Health care is one of the social goods that taxes should be used for. How they are used is a matter of proportionate distributive justice. Health care is a benefit of society, which is related to need and should be treated as a human and civil right. Whereas burdens are distributed on the basis of ability to be borne, health care is allocated on the basis of the fundamental rights of each individual. Health care may not be denied, awarded, or its quality compromised on the basis of “merit, desert, [or] social contribution.”¹⁰³ “The basic level of health care necessary for decent human living must involve a sufficiently high level of quality health care.”¹⁰⁴ The discussion of allocation, obviously, devolves to a question of the nature of a right and what makes health care a right. Human rights are recognized in secular society and enunciated in political and international documents. Curran defines a right as “that which is due someone as one’s own,” the ground for which lies in human dignity, “coming ultimately from the fact of creation by a gracious God.”¹⁰⁵ Human dignity correlates with and grounds the right to have external goods sufficient for a living that corresponds to that dignity.¹⁰⁶ Health care, as one of the external goods of society, is deemed a right on the basis of human dignity.

In his essays on economic issues, Curran proposes the virtue of justice as a mediating concept for the question of Christian conscience: what is God’s plan or will for society today? His observations aim at finding a meaningful and reasonable voice with which to expose, for example, the immorality of the individualism and market-place mentality that often keeps a high level of basic health care out of reach of many of the poor in American society. The discussion takes place in a mixed arena: theologically, it traces rights back to God; politically, it recognizes their establishment to some kind of public and political consensus.¹⁰⁷ To facilitate rights-claims on society, while affirming what Christians believe about creation,

¹⁰² Curran, *Toward an American*, 104-05.

¹⁰³ Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, 256.

¹⁰⁴ Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, 269.

¹⁰⁵ Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, 262.

¹⁰⁶ Curran, *Toward an American*, 104.

¹⁰⁷ Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, 262.

Christian ethics employs the principles of social and distributive justice. Distributive justice is a value that can also be related to the American ethos, to its constitutional tradition, and its democratic ideology as economic democracy.

This understanding of mediation implies that: (1) the underlying concept of society adequately reflects the historical constellation of state and civil society as experienced in the United States; (2) the ethicist is able to demonstrate the value of a choice or course of action that facilitates the functioning and relationship of civil society, the state, and the individual. The obliging force of social moral norms emerges in the historical recognition of value, as goal and responsibility within the historical possibility of human social relationships. By taking as his starting point the virtues depicted in Thomism as essential for ordering society, Curran assumes their relevance to a society that in no way resembles the classicist conception. His studies do not subject American society to the theological and ethical scrutiny required by the methodological steps of stance and model. Curran's approach is deductive, although he takes a historical approach in conveying the Catholic ethical tradition and establishing what is included in "goods of society." The theological principle of the common destiny of the goods of creation is also employed deductively. As a result Curran's reflections facilitate at best a notional or conceptual mediation, rather than a historical, experiential mediation. Again, the deductive structure of Curran's process is evident. (Grace is mediated through self-transcending historical experience. Working for justice is self-transcending historical experience. Therefore the latter is equivalent to the former.) Curran's proposals for economic ethics do not provide evidence linking the principles invoked to the substantive issues or religious realities they are meant to address.

C. Conclusion: a misconstrued dialogue

If Christian ethics involves dialogue between the church, state, and civil society, and if norms and principles only become compelling when a particular historical and social situation is understood, reflected upon, and responded to, then the values and principles that Curran has enunciated remain in an inchoate and theoretical state, not having emerged from inductive knowing of historical reality. Individual freedom, distributive justice, the common good, and fundamental human rights provide categories for relating often

conflicting and competing interests. In Curran's essays, however, they are not mediatory of anything real, especially not of the divine activity in the world or signs of the messianic kingdom. Without being processed by the methodological steps and theological claims of stance, model, and person and experienced in the concreteness of social reality, the mediating value remains primarily notional.

The evidence from this chapter suggests that Curran misconstrues the dialogue that is normative for the church as it develops its relationship with the modern world as a moral discourse between Thomistic social-political thought and the principles of civil society. This approach is embedded in an uncritical acceptance of the validity of Thomistic social principles and virtues for contemporary life and in an anachronistic equating of American society/culture with the idea of civil society that originated in the Enlightenment and the American republican project. For moral theology to understand the moral meaning of the economic and political realities represented by the abortion issue and the injustice and promise of the American economy, its methodological pattern must demonstrate the historical and empirical realism of what Curran has already described as the structure of moral consciousness.

These essays also fail to adequately integrate theology and ethics, thus weakening the Christian position in dialogue. Curran understands Aquinas to affirm that our knowledge of God's moral will is indirect and, therefore, human knowing is mediating and leads to analogous knowledge of morality within the scope of the five-fold mysteries. This interpretation of the Angelic Doctor, however, makes sense only within a cosmology and metaphysics in which "what is true...of the universe at large, and of man as an individual must also be true of human society."¹⁰⁸ Without this metaphysics, the reality of mediation requires a new grounding that is in harmony with historical mindedness. In order to mediate the religious significance of political choices, it would be necessary to follow a theological method that not only translates Christian beliefs in terms of human, social categories, but also validates such interpretations in accord with the standards of theological verification. In effect, Christian positions in dialogue are weakened, because they lack grounding in historical consciousness. Despite his insistence on inductive method, historical consciousness, the meditational function of human experience, the need to incorporate

¹⁰⁸ Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, vol. 2, *Medieval Philosophy, Part II: Albert the Great to Duns Scotus*, (The Newman Press, Westminster, Md.: 1950; Garden City, N.Y.: Image Books, 1962), 134.

the bible into all levels of ethical discourse, and the necessity of dialogue, one tends to find in Curran “the mentality proper to a pre-Vatican scholastic rationalism still dominating.”¹⁰⁹

1. *Historical consciousness.* Curran’s reflections lack the historical concreteness necessary for the dialogue that is integral to ethical knowing. He insists on the need to find an effective language for the church in the public discourse on America’s politics and its ethos. In the present discussions, this involves articulating the faith-understandings of individual freedom and the common good. Curran exhibits a historical approach to past ethical thought, for example, when he contrasts the meaning of state, law, and justice in the older natural law paradigm with their meaning in a more inductive, experience based approach. However, terms that are representative of values or goals in contemporary history (such as freedom, common good, participation, and human right) are used as if their place and use in civil society were enough to make their meaning self-evident. However, as Stanley Hauerwas maintains: “freedom and equality are not self-interpreting, but require a tradition.” As abstract ideals, these and other rights of civil society, lead to different understandings of “the appropriate aims of society” and thus of the common good.¹¹⁰ The meaning of freedom, therefore, deserves critical, historical discussion.

Sociology registers serious doubt that the meanings of these words still live in such a historical tradition or that the American democracy can be substantively regarded as a community of moral discourse and judgment.¹¹¹ Michael Meagher and Alasdair MacIntyre have argued that terms such as freedom have

¹⁰⁹ Donald J. Keefe, “Church, State, and Charles Curran,” *Communio* 4 (Summer 1977): 116.

¹¹⁰ Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 113. Richard Rorty analyzes the same breakdown of common values and meaning among the political left in the United States and the impact it has on proposing a vision for the country and building a consensus that can effectively bring about social reform. See Richard Rorty, *Achieving our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth Century America* (Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard University Press, 1998)

¹¹¹ Robert N. Bellah, et al, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (New York: Harper and Row, 1985); Alan Wolfe, *Moral Freedom: The Impossible Idea that Defines the Way We Live Now* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001). Neither author rules out the possibility of a public discourse about the public good and common welfare, but both indicate the negative and restricting influence of individualism on the emergence of such a debate. In contrast to these empirically grounded views, Curran comes very close to identifying the common good with the democratic process. In his evaluation of Alinsky, for example, Curran takes for granted that both state and society are pluralistic and diverse to the extent that there is no ideal reality, but a constant ebb and flow of conflicting and competing interests and viewpoints. In Curran’s approach, moral theology does not venture into the area of suggesting new societal structures or institutions, but supports a process in which the rights of the individual (and

been cut loose from the social ties that moor them and give them value.¹¹² The so-called sovereignty of the people often devolves into political disenfranchisement.¹¹³ Curran is no doubt correct in his observation that no metaphysical, ethical, or religious agreement exists as the basis for public discourse, but he does not bring the historical extent and impact of pluralism and societal breakdown to bear on the moral assessment of the issues under discussion.

Curran's defense of individual freedom is related to the common good not only by acceptance of, but confidence in the democratic process. If the common good is described as a process of inquiry and action, then democracy can be viewed as the political articulation of this theory. However, when democratic process is related to the common good as a means to the end, then both must have a place at the table of dialogue, where they must submit to rigorous empirical inquiry. Without any verification that the democratic process is achieving what it theoretically is meant to achieve, it becomes even less clear how this process can be regarded as mediating the divine reality in history. Curran's commitment to mediation needs to be contextualized in a more empirical understanding of the requirements of dialogue.

Although the differences in meaning and value that Hauerwas describes may be resolved or accepted through dialogue, the dialogue will not occur if civil and human rights are treated as "social" values or beliefs with universally valid and univocal meanings. The role of dialogue in shaping and grounding a just and ethical society requires that social and moral pluralism be concretized historically in terms of both civil society (and all its subgroups) and the religious communities in which divergent worldviews and values emerge.

2. *Relationality-responsibility.* In fairness to Curran, his discussions of law and morality and of economic justice are about methodology and not about the substantive issues that are the means through which freedom and justice become real. However, in his methodological proposals Curran strongly argues for a

groups of individuals) and the social aspects of human living can move forward, although always marked by tension and competition for power. See Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, 147-75.

¹¹² Michael M. Meagher, "The American Experiment and the Crisis of Community," *Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies* 13 (2001): 15-31; MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 1-5.

¹¹³ John Ralston Saul calls this loss of popular democratic power "the great leap backwards." Although Saul has a Canadian perspective and speaks of the problem of modern democracy on an international scale, his reflective study brings home the point that civil society and its freedoms are not self-interpreting principles. See John Ralston Saul, *The Unconscious Civilization* (Concord, Ontario: House of Anansi Press, 1995).

relation model in order to grasp the historical uniqueness of what is ethically at stake. Consistency with this principle of method requires addressing social, ethical issues in their historical and social contexts, looking ahead to the consequences of the conclusions suggested, and responding to the question of meaningful social change: what impact does this choice have on the emergent common good. For example, the issue of legal access to abortion is larger than civil liberty. Civil liberty in this case needs to be placed in a relational-responsible context of the impact of abortion on society's attitude toward life and the value of the transmission of life, the use of scientific and technological medical procedures as solutions to human problems, the socio-economic situations that lead to abortion as a choice, and the ineffectiveness of a debate that continues only in divisive and acrimonious tones.¹¹⁴ Above all, since freedom is a transcendental or relational notion, it cannot function as a moral value unless the multiple relationships that constitute the common good are critically probed.

Kenneth R. Melchin points out that "moral deliberation is not a 'logical' matter of deducing implications from first principles, but a process of getting insights and making judgments about concrete moral experiences, guided by Christian faith."¹¹⁵ An approach that takes historical consciousness as a process of coming to know and to respond to contemporary experience will debate, for example, the economic and political presuppositions that are shaping society here and now. P. Travis Kroeker, in his analysis of *Economic Justice For All*, submits that there is need for a substantive debate between the "aims and assumptions" of the economic and social theories that form the underpinnings of the political strategies and aims and assumptions of "the moral and religious vision of the common good." Kroeker asks how a Christian ethical vision can thrive, if it places itself into the iron cage of a fundamentally materialist understanding of society? The optimism of the bishops (which Curran shares) "that a tolerable harmony can be achieved" within the wide ranging diversity regarding goods and values, "lies at the heart of the liberal theory."¹¹⁶ As a result, an ethical dualism remains in Catholic moral theory: Catholics are urged to reject consumerism, as a form of greed, while ignoring "the structure of choices and rationality present within the

¹¹⁴ See Margaret Somerville, *The Ethical Canary: Science, Society and the Human Spirit* (Toronto: Viking, 2000), 23-36; Duane K. Friesen, *Artists Citizens Philosophers Seeking the Peace of the City* (Waterloo, Ont.: Herald Press, 2000), 135.

¹¹⁵ Melchin, *Living with Other People*, 121.

¹¹⁶ Kroeker, 112.

dynamics of production and consumption in advanced industrial economies.”¹¹⁷ This assumption (that a tolerable harmony can be achieved) must be questioned by an inquiry into “what is the substance of the common good and the language of participation, and how is this related to the institutions and practices of advanced industrial political economies.”¹¹⁸

Curran’s recourse to broad, abstract descriptions of society, state, common good, and individual rights fails to provide the tools necessary for a concrete, substantive, and ethically critical analysis of the institutions that are constitutive elements of the economy. By casting the common good in terms of procedures and processes that express the tension and balance between individual rights and social obligations, Curran remains silent on the content that not only would be part of a coherent description of the common good, but would also betray a substantive, Christian vision. As a result, these essays ignore the intermediate structures between individual and society, which represent the means for doing justice and lack a vision of the common good that gives direction to the intermediate steps that have to be taken.

If Curran were to make full use of his method, specifically its relationality-responsibility model, his analyses and proposals would be “coherently related to the socio-historical institutions and structures of choice within which people experience their daily lives.”¹¹⁹ In this way, they would assist the Christian conscience in interpreting its social, ethical choices as participation in the unfolding of the kingdom of God in the world. By limiting the Christian contribution to economic ethics to generalities that overlook the transcendental thrust of the common good, Curran’s approach moves too timidly toward overcoming the dichotomy between daily life and the gospel. Kroeker’s criticism of the Catholic hierarchy’s economic teachings can be applied as well to Curran’s work: an ethical reflection that “fails to look beyond narrowly defined human needs and desires to a divine ordering of life, in which we are already participants” tends to be entrenched in “an anthropocentric utilitarianism.”¹²⁰ Kroeker’s use of “divine ordering” (rather than “divine order”) is compatible with the historical approach that Curran requires of ethics. Moreover, the dialectic dynamics of dialogue about concrete action and pragmatic gains, without a thorough theological

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 117.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 112.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 115.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

critique of the underlying values of the economic and political ideologies that define what is good for society, tends to alienate rather than mediate--having the effect of marginalizing the religious perspective by limiting it to concerns about the material needs and aspirations of the members of society. This is a place that Curran's ethical transcendental method intended to prevent moral theology from going.

An ethical-theological view that is integrated with a sociological-political description of society, but does not make it clear how the two are combined, leaves the historical reality in which justice is to be done in ethical limbo. In Curran's misconstrued dialogue, the church seeks some claim to ethical legitimacy by appealing to principles that (it is assumed) make sense to all rationally minded people, instead of being present as one of the dissenting and interest driven (in response to God in faith) parties engaged in the public discourse. This is not a mediating role and, in effect, impedes the church from making the necessary contribution that, by reason of its faith and tradition, it is in a unique position to make toward shaping a morally responsible civil society.¹²¹

In his analysis of the bishops' pastoral letter on the economy, Curran does not include "model" in his levels of ethical reflection, although model is integral to his approach. All of the values at stake in his economic analysis (equality, participation, and freedom, democracy and economics) are relational realities, the value and practice of which require moral knowledge and responsibility that is "grasped by practical insight, motivated by reflection, and executed by decision."¹²² Without model, the historical-social dynamics of societal life and the common good that should emerge as an ethical call out of the myriad possibilities inherent in any set of social needs and opportunities remain theoretical.

While it is not possible to come up with a universally applicable construct of the "common good," some kind of concrete goal setting is necessary for determining what is feasible and necessary in planning action that intends the formation of a more just society. One way to gain clarity on the social mission of the church includes addressing the question of strategies for influencing or "transforming" society. A more consistent employment of the potential of the relation-response model ought to result in workable visions of

¹²¹ See Grosse Kracht, 393-403.

¹²² Lonergan, *Insight*, 643.

the kind of social structures and relationships that make up the just transformation or, at least, reform of society.

3. *Theological mediation.* In revising natural law, Curran proposes to replace nature with human experience as a source of ethical wisdom and understanding—an approach that seems well suited for dealing with issues of individual freedom and the economic rights of persons in society. Curran’s constant recourse to the ethical values and principles of the Roman Catholic tradition detracts from the holistic vision implied in the methodological tasks of stance and model. Human action is purposive. The exercise of freedom and the sharing of society’s goods and burdens must be a dynamic, future oriented process that has some goal and provides a “transcendent” (that is, greater than personal fulfillment) and compelling argument for compliance.¹²³ The absence of model, which “sees the human person in terms of one’s multiple relationships with God, neighbor, world, and self, and the call to live responsibly in the midst of these relationships,”¹²⁴ weakens the credibility and persuasiveness of his position.

Curran’s empirical methodology aims at discerning the “signs of the time,” that is, human events and possibilities as signs of God’s ordering activity in the world. His revised approach to natural law theory begins with nature as historically emergent and experientially known and proposes a model of morality entirely different from the teleological or deontological models grounded in the cosmology and metaphysics of classical culture. Curran’s conviction that the church’s inquiry into moral truth can, as Murray has written, “lie only along the road of freedom—social, civil, political and religious freedom,”¹²⁵ infers a critical encounter with the prevailing ethos of the society where transformative action is to take place.

¹²³ This is implied when methodologically “model” is understood in light of “person” and vice versa. Model describes the relationships and the responsibilities that emerge from them; person focuses on the dynamic process of growth and change and the interplay of agency (what is done) and subjectivity (what the agent becomes in the action). If working toward a just society is a transformational task (Christ transforming culture), then the ethical issues, though clarified by Curran’s historical explanations of changing stance and/or paradigms, are obscured by that very clarity. What obscures them is the absence of historical-relational concreteness and their remoteness from the gradual or, at times, revolutionary process of social change. Without these enabling steps in ethical reflection, moral theology risks what Kroeker has described above as alienation.

¹²⁴ Curran, *Tensions*, 96.

¹²⁵ John Courtney Murray, Murray Archives, file no. 493, quoted in Hooper, *The Ethics of Discourse*, 162.

In the face of widespread injustice in democratic societies, entrusting the common good to the democratic process and the moral responsiveness of a nation's people seems based on a confidence that is theoretical and without persuasive, methodological force. In order to respond to its social mission, the American Catholic church must confront the deep divisions that exist among the people of the United States on the very issues it addresses. In his essays on the church and society, Curran tends to avoid the more abrasive, but necessary dialectic process that is part of moral decision-making and social change—a process Somerville sees as indispensable.

In our secular, pluralistic, multicultural societies, where we cannot find a ready consensus on important values, it is very difficult to communicate the values that should govern an issue such as abortion. But this difficulty makes it more, not less, important to try to do so.¹²⁶

The dialogue between the church and society has several partners and includes words, symbols, and images that each partner uses to concretize its own appropriation of a world-mediated-by-meaning.¹²⁷ Society has not placed the church in charge of coordinating the dialogue. The reality of pluralism forces the church to work with its constituents, partners, and the general public toward the formation of social meanings, shared values, and models of relationships that are in fidelity to its social mission. In dialogue the church can revise and deepen the understanding of its own symbols, images, and teachings. Just as essential to dialogue, however, is that the symbols, images, and teachings of the dialogue partner (the culture and ethos of a society) come under critical judgment and be revisable. Unless culture, too, is subject to change, the slogan “Christ transforming culture” has no significance.

These observations raise the question, both for moral theology and for public discourse, of whether the church has to be constrained by the theoretical etiquette of civil society, assuming neutral language to express its values and commitments. The question of mediation (“signs of the time”) is central not only to Curran's ethical hermeneutic of experience, but to the identity and authenticity of the church. However, as employed by Curran, mediation describes only a process of social communication and of finding a common language for this task of social change. Curran holds that to effectively incorporate gospel and theological values into the social structures of a society, the church has to present Catholic

¹²⁶ Somerville, 36.

¹²⁷ Lonergan, *Method*, 28-9.

social viewpoints and values in terms of the beliefs and goals of the general populace, as well as recognize the attitudes and call of the gospel in shared cultural values. The dispositions, values, principles, and attitudes of the Catholic tradition are already reflective, in Curran's judgment, of a melding of faith and reason--a way of working toward a public consensus. Such a construal of the American society seems naïve and underestimates what is involved in moral public dialogue. Whereas Curran is clear about pluralism within the church, he does not portray the impact of society's pluralism on ethical dialogue.

From a descriptive, sociological perspective, Peter Berger points out that pluralism "impinges on human consciousness, on what takes place within our minds...and brings with it a relativization of all normative contents of consciousness."¹²⁸ Thus, the encounter with other (non-Christian or secular) cultures means an encounter not only with competing claims to truth and righteousness, but with competing and contradictory claims within those claims. In such a situation, constructive church-world dialogue will take the form of a frank,

no-holds-barred confrontation between competing truth claims *on the level of truth*...To enter such a dialogue is dangerous unless one has a very clear and confident idea of one's own experience of truth. If one lacks such an idea, one will in short order be sucked into the worldview of whoever *does* have clarity and confidence.¹²⁹

When Curran talks about dialogue and mediation, he clearly describes a mutual exchange about truth and uniting human endeavors with the divine initiative. Mediation is realized in a process of responsibility that is not merely thematized theologically, but is ontologically grounded in the reality of the five-fold Christian mysteries. Both the moral dialogue and the dialogical structure of moral theological reflection are meant to be a movement from not knowing to knowing, an experiment in self-transcendence. The dialogue is not limited to "a very pragmatic goal, namely to discover commonalities in order to form coalitions for this or that secular purpose." Such an exchange reflects "one's feelings about the project at issue," but does not transcend its pragmatic purpose or contest the truth of the positions and counterpositions that emerge, in a way that creates new religious syntheses or transforms some part of the culture or ethos in its journey toward truth.¹³⁰

¹²⁸ Berger, 67-68.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 76-77.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

From what has just been said, it follows that the church's role in public discourse can neither be detached from the religious meaning of civil values and human rights nor devoid of political or social purpose. There is nothing in the substantive questions (abortion, economy) that necessitates that the ethical debate be limited to the relation of law and morality or church and state. In fact, in pointing out these restrictive parameters, Curran effectively repositions the question in the arena of civil society and public discourse, where it is inappropriate to remain within the ethical categories that have developed in Roman Catholic thought. Asserting the continuing value of Scholastic principles of social and legal justice is not helpful; it is not what the church needs to positively identify itself within the process of dialogue and to speak and act as a sacrament of the unity and reconciliation of humankind. In order to facilitate the integration of faith and life, church and culture the church in dialogue must speak in its own voice, faithfully reflecting the full breadth of its beliefs.

Gospel values are often found in what is already happening in society, in the initiatives of those (besides the church) who are striving to build a better world. Curran holds that the church takes what it finds in culture, accepts, integrates, and transforms it, so that "secular reality...becomes a saving mystery."¹³¹ His effort to mediate religious realities through general and natural law ethical concepts seeks a way to keep in tense balance the goals of civil society and the mission of the church. This approach, however, while no doubt able to connect with some part of the mind-set and value system of many North Americans, appears anachronistic or at least ahistorical and culturally biased. The concepts and principles of the Catholic tradition remain abstract and theoretical and the obligation they impose remains impotent and ideal, until they pass through the crucible of critical social analysis and theological verification. This approach also goes against Curran's earlier stated purpose of discovering moral direction in the relations and responses that are constitutive of a social situation. Effective mediation in moral theology includes a critical appraisal of what is happening in society in terms of progress or decline in the dynamic process of society building and the ability to explicitly relate that to Christian religious images.

Moral theology proposes to assist the Christian in joining with others to bring about changes in society that can be understood theologically as overturning sinful structures and building up the kingdom of

¹³¹ Curran, *Issues*, 9.

God within human history. It must therefore have the capacity not only to discern good and evil in particular, historical events and movements, but to confront the truth claims and the worldviews with which it enters into dialogue. Curran's discussion of individual freedom does not appear to meet up to this standard. It is a discussion carried out under the aegis of *Dignitatis Humanae*, but without fully communicating the document's message, which relates freedom to the pursuit of and adherence to spiritual values. *Dignitatis Humanae* relates freedom primarily to the capacity and obligation to believe in and respond to God. It is essentially relational and oriented to the common good, understood in the context of and in continuity with an increasing consciousness of the dignity of the human person and the need "for freedom in human society."¹³²

Of course, within society and within the church there is room and need for dialogue around the contingent meanings and possibilities both of human freedom and the common good. However, without a vision of the common good that stands outside the process and draws the *status quo* in the direction of progress and self-transcendence, the meaning of personal freedom and the common good (no longer explicable in terms of an organic, naturally ordered society) risks getting lost in a tautological circle. Curran's commitment to historical consciousness and inductive method set a theological agenda and a standard for his work: to facilitate the church coming to know itself existentially and historically in a way that exposes its creative freedom and religious responsibility. Lonergan, whose methodological insights are never far away in Curran's approach, suggests that the church comes to know itself through a historical process that surrenders "to the demands of the human spirit: be attentive, be intelligent, be reasonable, be responsible, be in love."¹³³ This process, moreover, involves interpreting the historical situation as a source of social action, making sure that moral consciousness is "grasped by practical insight, motivated by reflection, and executed by decision."¹³⁴ In this approach the church's social mission becomes a historically contingent, but no less real measure of its identity and the self-transcending appropriation of this identity.

The decision, then, is not a consequent but a new emergence that both realizes the course of action or rejects it, and realizes an effectively rational self-consciousness or fails to do so. Nonetheless,

¹³² *Dignitatis Humanae*, n.1, *Vatican II*, 799.

¹³³ Lonergan, *Method*, 268

¹³⁴ Lonergan, *Insight*, 643.

though the act of will is a contingent emergence, it is also an act of the subject; the measure of the freedom with which the act occurs also is the measure of [the subject's] responsibility for it.¹³⁵

Mediation understood as social communication enables collaboration in the struggle for justice, but raises issues of the church's freedom and identity. Unless Christian ethics provides a critical theological analysis that can distinguish between the fact and ideology of civil society and of civil freedoms and rights, it holds the church to standards of dialogue based not on what is, but on the modern idea of civil society.¹³⁶

Hooper observes that in social ethics "one cannot start in the realm of the theoretical-ethical and derive from that realm the juridical-political."¹³⁷ Arguments from ethical and theological principles and a Thomistic appreciation of social reality may exercise some claims in the order of truth, but they provide little direction for moral action in the realm of the political, which is not derived from the order of truth. In addition, as Adam Seligman argues: "the assumed synthesis of public and private, individual and social concerns and desiderata, upon which the idea of civil society rests, no longer holds."¹³⁸ Curran's arguments pivot between the theoretical concepts of Thomism and a theoretical concept of civil society. The normative value of such a misconstrued dialogue is very limited indeed and unable to resolve the conflict between individualism and community that Curran sees as central to social ethics.

Finally, Curran's writings reflect on the economy and on freedom contain a perplexing ambiguity in their understanding of the state. Curran's position on equity and participation suppose the reality of the modern state and the evolution of political consciousness since the Enlightenment. His acknowledgement of the role of power and conflict in economic progress demonstrates that he holds the older theory of an organic society as no longer applicable. In speaking of the economy, however, Curran speaks of the common good as the end or goal of society, which includes "various spiritual and material goods existing within society but above all involves the ordered relationships existing in society."¹³⁹ Whereas the common

¹³⁵ Ibid., 642.

¹³⁶ See Adam B. Seligman, *The Idea of Civil Society* (New York: The Free Press, 1992), 15-58.

¹³⁷ Hooper, *The Ethics of Discourse*, 144.

¹³⁸ Seligman, *Civil Society*, 204-206.

¹³⁹ Curran, *Toward an American*, 99. Elsewhere Curran recognizes that the state is not referred to as a "natural society" in contemporary Catholic social teaching. Curran himself argues for an acceptance of the modern reality of the state as a starting point for social ethics. However, he does not follow through on this understanding, so that his comments on the relations of Church-society, Church-state lack definition and remain somewhat abstracted from the historical-cultural institutions and structures that must be an

good played only a minor role in Curran's discussion of law and morality, he invests it with a central function, the conceptual foundation for the discussion of both just taxation and access to health care. Underlying this difference are two divergent views of the state.

Curran views the common good as a process that safeguards the freedom, equality, and participation of all. He also regards it as an outcome that becomes real in the fulfillment of each individual within a society as a social being and human person. Curran rightly sees the state as ethically neutral (as opposed to an established ethics), but with ethical responsibilities, so that the state cannot limit itself to matters of public order. In both cases, Curran expects governance to exercise responsibility for the common good,¹⁴⁰ a position that appears to be an amalgam of the older natural law approach and a newer historicist methodology. In doing what might be described as using Maritain to correct Murray, Curran obscures the meaning of what he proposes in developing a revised natural law approach.

In an attempt to measure Curran's contribution to the development of Roman Catholic social ethics, one must turn to the expectations set at Vatican II for developing dialogue with the modern world and the need for a theological interpretation of history. The critical questions raised by the Council, however, are not visible in the essays reviewed here, making it difficult to identify how Curran's work advances that agenda. Instead, his essays remain on the level of principle and conceptualization, historically adjusted but deductively applied to his topics. Biblical values and theological principles become concepts that are applied as mediating principles to complex social questions. Curran's analysis does not complete the move from the classicist to the historically conscious paradigm. In order to honor historical consciousness one must do more than interpret past teachings in terms of their historical contexts.

evitable part of the formation of any social ethical judgments. See Curran, *American Catholic Social Ethics*, 195-232.

¹⁴⁰ Curran, *Toward an American*, 101; Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, 261-62.

CHAPTER SIX

THE SOCIAL VALUE OF LIFE

A fundamental tenet of Curran's approach is that there is no uniquely Christian content to what is entailed in the work of social justice and the transformation of human society. Basic human rights and the common good are rooted in what it means to be human. The goals of social justice are intrinsic to human living together and make a claim on all humanity—societies, states, and persons.

The methodology Curran articulates presupposes that the principles that are basic to human life are discovered in historical knowledge and reflection on human experience and embraced as values in action. Ethical reflection pays attention not only to structures and public policy, but also to attitudes toward life and life in community. Moreover, Christian ethics, as a theological discipline, is committed to the task of integrating faith and life, reason and revelation. Therefore, general human ethical judgments and responses are connected to the mysteries of Christian faith, as a source of moral understanding and a guide to moral purpose and action. These mysteries are present and celebrated in the believing community, especially in its liturgy. Developing "the important connection between liturgy and social justice,"¹ is, in Curran's proposition, integral to the purpose of moral theology. In the language of Vatican II:

the liturgy is the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; it is also the fount from which all her power flows. For the goal of apostolic endeavor is that all who are made sons of God by faith and baptism should come together to praise God in the midst of his Church, to take part in the Sacrifice and to eat the Lord's Supper.²

At the same time, moral theology--like the church when it joins in public moral discourse--has multiple audiences (for example, the general public, the church members, the academic community). In emphasizing the universality and impartiality of moral conclusions, however, there is always a danger of

¹ Charles E. Curran, *Catholic Social Teaching 1891-Present: A Historical, Theological, and Ethical Analysis* (Washington, D. C.: Georgetown University Press, 2002), 121.

² *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n. 10, *Vatican II*, 6.

overlooking their faith-connection. Although his studies of war and of bio-ethical issues are prefaced by Christian perspectival considerations, the theological task, in which faith serves both as source and summit to which the moral life is directed, is left incomplete. Curran's conclusions are not linked back to the faith-based images of the eschatological reality of the church or the symbols of the ever-coming reign of God.

Life is the most basic of human values and the right to life is fundamental to conceptual unity in any discussion of other human rights. From a Judaeo-Christian religious perspective, "to be alive means through God's *ruah* [breath] to stand in a substantial pattern of interconnection, to have part in a medium that is both individually enlivening and common to all that is creaturely."³ The flourishing of life is a characteristic description of a central norm of Christian social ethics. The nurturing and protection of life are a moral mandate that Christians trace back to the first chapters of *Genesis*. Life is a social reality, a common good. Death means not only the loss of individual life, but of "participation in the medium common to that which is alive."⁴

Curran's discussions of the new reproductive and genetic technologies as well as his discussion of the justice of war are examined in this chapter. The thematic unity of the topics is found in the social responsibility for life—not just for human life, but also for life on this planet; not just for present life, but also for life in the future. The care for life is a responsibility that cannot fully escape the disorder of sin and limitations of human finitude. However, it is not enough that Christians point out the incompleteness of salvation or appeal to the presence of sin in the world in lamenting the devaluing, abuse, and destruction of life that is the result of human choices. Rosemary Radford Ruether stresses the oppositional or prophetic role that Christian symbols play in Christian ethics. "Jesus, his life and death, are the paradigms drawn from our interpreted experience that mediate hope in the midst of adversity."⁵

The credibility of Curran's empirical, inductive approach to ethical discourse depends, nevertheless, on its ability to go beyond particular questions of human manipulation, in order to question the attitudes and values toward life, operative in the social response to life and institutionalized in the

³ Michael Welker, *God the Spirit*, trans. John F. Hoffmeyer (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 160.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 159-60.

⁵ Rosemary Radford Ruether, "The Holocaust: Theological and Ethical Reflections," *The Twentieth Century: A Theological Overview*, ed. Gregory Baum (Ottawa: Novalis: 1999), 81.

structures of society. Can Christian ethics, in speaking to the world, shy away from its central paradigms and symbols, through which the church historically recognizes and appropriates God's grace and its mission in confronting the realities of war and genetic engineering on life?⁶ As broad as these concerns are, they require a larger horizon of understanding. In confronting, for example, cultural myths that instill faith in progress at any cost or convince us of the human inevitability of war, Christian ethics must be reminded "that faith is the great confronter, uncovering in us a capacity to fight for life in the face of death and venture the risks necessary to be part of a radically changed world."⁷

The kind of tasks that Curran has set for "stance" and "model" are left incomplete in his reflections on war and peace, genetic and medical technology. The ability of his method to situate what is happening—in relation to the broader social responsibility for life and the religious urgency of the kingdom of God and the promise of unlimited life—is abandoned in favor of a temporal perspective in which values are adjudicated by proportional reasoning. While Curran relates the value of and right to life to "the special relation of the human being to the life-giving act of God and [to] the destiny of each person... for the fullness of life,"⁸ he employs an ethical approach that views this value and right as relative.

The calculation of life's value, as a personal and a communal good, brings social ethics into a territory that is rife with disturbing uncertainties and absolute claims. In order to avoid the pitfalls of pious exhortation or amorphous indecisiveness, moral theology requires consistency in approach and coherence of method. Where ethical choices emerge out of the immediacy of the existential-historical situation, there is need for some overriding consideration that guides the ethicist's judgment and justifies the relative proportionality of each value in terms of the overall context. In a formal fashion, Curran sees the model of relationality-responsibility functioning as the mediating measure that guides proportional reasoning. In

⁶ See Lonergan, *Method*, 363-64. Lonergan describes the Church as a structured and out-going process whose purpose and "aim is the realization of the kingdom of God not only within its own organization but in the whole of human society and not only in the after life but also in this life." See also *Method*, 29. Here Lonergan discusses theology's need also to make the connections with the Christian tradition, which "makes explicit our implicit intending of God in all our intending by speaking of the Spirit that is given to us, the Son who redeemed us, of the Father who sent the Son and with the Son sends the Spirit, and of our future destiny when we shall know, not as in a glass darkly, but face to face."

⁷ Larry L. Rasmussen, "Next Journey: Sustainability for Six Billion and More," *Ethics For A Small Planet: New Horizons on Population, Consumption, and Ecology*, ed. Daniel C. Maguire and Larry L. Rasmussen (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1998), 67-140, 129.

⁸ Curran, *Issues*, 198-99.

practice, however, the relation-response model is not concretized in a way that points to the social good that results from any particular choice. Finally, the social good needs to be articulated in terms of the Christian images that symbolize the religious reality that is sought (albeit transcendently in limited, contingent action).

The issues of war and the revolutionary bio-medical technologies are issues of life. Their aims may be positively defined as peace and health, but their enactment implicates society in a process of decisions about who should die and the responsibility for the creation of defective life. The impact of these choices is both immediate and far-reaching, re-defining the meaning of responsibility and requiring an ethical approach that does not lose sight of the social dimensions of responsibility and the shared meaning of life.

A. The future of life: is stance enough?

Curran's approach to the complex moral issues arising out of the rapid developments occurring in reproductive technologies and genetics provokes questions about methodology. Many of these bio-medical breakthroughs impact on how human beings view themselves and create new expectations about life and survival, about human society and value. The power to intervene in the process of life and the risks and opportunities that accompany it raise questions not only of personal but also of social responsibility and meaning. Curran's positions reflect his attempt to move the discussion from a purely scientific arena to a place where human values can be more easily recognized. The human value of scientific advances is to be weighed within a fully human perspective, a Christian understanding of life and history.

1. Bio-ethics: the moral consciousness of the scientific community. In the early 1970s, bioethics was only taking form as a human science. "It was a slow accumulation of concerns about the ambiguity of scientific progress that turned the old medical ethics into the new paths of bioethics."⁹ Ethical concern around scientific progress reflects first of all the sensitivity of the medical profession to the changes that were occurring in the practice of medicine. Beneath the surface of the most obvious and dramatic advances was "a boiling sea of research in which the secrets of metabolism, the endocrine system, the mechanism of

⁹ Albert R. Jonsen, *The Birth of Bioethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 3.

immunity and wound healing, the biology of reproduction and, most exciting of all, the secrets of the genetic code were revealed.”¹⁰

Science and medicine responded with a series of conferences which focused on issues ranging from the medical to the social, from prolongation of life to issues of overpopulation, from the need for experimentation to responsibility for human subjects. Particular problems were overtaken by a new context.

The world was unprepared socially, politically, and ethically for the advent of nuclear power. Now, biological research is in ferment, creating and promising methods of interference with ‘natural processes’ which could destroy or could transform nearly every aspect of human life which we value. It is necessary for every intelligent individual of our one world to consider the present and imminent possibilities.¹¹

James Gustafson, in 1967, noted that new anthropological understandings are required to keep up with scientific progress and the need for science and religion to work together toward “a much more detailed and clearer formulation of those values to be preserved and developed in human existence...so that these may indicate the direction that uses of research ought to take, and the limitations of those uses that ought to be truly formed.”¹² Awareness was emerging that the risks and promise inherent in biomedical research were to be treated “not simply as technical problems that could be easily fixed...but as ethical questions that required serious reflection and discussion.”¹³

As the issue of bioethics moved beyond the confines of the hospital and university, it became clearer that advances in medical technology also brought with them a great number and variety of human and social problems. Issues of biomedicine became a permanent part of society’s consciousness. Public response to this new situation, as Margaret Somerville observes, sends “early-warning signals about the ethical climate in our society.”¹⁴ Jonsen has shown that the technological possibilities of medicine could no longer be adequately considered within the frameworks established by medical ethics. It is not simply procedures and techniques that require ethical reflection, but the need for human and social control over the powers that science and technology have made available to humanity.

¹⁰ Ibid., 12.

¹¹ Proceedings of the Ciba Foundation Conference, 1962, quoted in Jonsen, 15.

¹² Quoted in Jonsen, 17.

¹³ Jonsen, 19.

¹⁴ Somerville, x.

“As bioethics was coming into being, Roman Catholic moral theology was in turmoil. It was undergoing an inner debate about its method and suffering from dissension about some of its central doctrines.”¹⁵ Among these doctrines is the understanding of what it means to be human in relation to other human beings, the natural world, and its creator. Karl Rahner¹⁶ points out that, the power of humans to transform themselves—psychologically, physically, genetically—cannot be rejected off hand by Christians nor ought humanity set arbitrary limits on what it can know and do. Rahner suggests, however, that the reality of genetics and reproductive technologies requires a new hermeneutic framework for appreciating the moral possibilities and dangers in the new science. The reasons given by Rahner for calling for a new hermeneutic include the following: the new bio-technologies are multidimensional; in the long run they imply a direction and vision of society; experiments or procedures do not only affect groups or individuals, their outcomes have repercussions on society, taken as a whole; the language used to discuss the possibilities of human manipulation has changed from the frightening or promising tones of totalitarian utopias, to a more sober, rational, and confident assurance of the benefits that come with a technological overhaul of human living and of the earth. The practical moral casuistry of medical ethics is not adequate.

Instead of developing a new hermeneutic, as Rahner suggests, Catholic ethics was hindered in its approach to the revolutionary changes in biomedicine by a commitment to the physicalism of natural law approaches and a papal positivism that feels bound not only to the systematic method, but to the conclusions of earlier popes on these issues, with the result that “sciences and lay experience remain marginal factors in the continuing reflection of the Church on familial, medical, and sexual matters.”¹⁷ At the same time, moral theology struggled to positively respond to the task left to it by the Vatican Council: to understand these complex and dilemma filled advances in the light of the gospel and to avoid being enslaved or controlled by them, by working “to establish a political, social, and economic order at the service of man to assert and develop the dignity proper to individuals and society.”¹⁸

¹⁵ Jonsen, 37.

¹⁶ Karl Rahner, “Experiment Mensch,” *Schriften zur Theologie*, Bd.VIII (Einsiedeln: Benziger Verlag, 1967), 260-85.

¹⁷ Richard A. McCormick, *Health and Medicine in the Catholic Tradition: Tradition in Transition* (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 4-5.

¹⁸ *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 9, *Vatican II*, 909.

2. *Faith and science.* Curran is aware of dilemma caused by the Church's traditional focus on the individual patient and individual medical action, as well as the altered social context of biomedical possibilities.¹⁹ He proposes a creative and revolutionary approach to better understanding the obligations and responsibilities of Christian life in the world and facilitating the kind of dialogue and cooperation, that will help build up the new heaven and the new earth.

a. *Argument: The normative function of science.* The Second Vatican Council sought ways of expressing and concretizing the relationship of the church with the world, including the scientific community.²⁰ The church

profits from the experience of past ages, from the progress of the sciences, and the riches hidden in the various cultures, through which greater light is thrown on the nature of man himself is more clearly revealed and new avenues to truth are opened up.”²¹

The council acknowledged that scientific and technological progress can lead to agnosticism, a skewing of human values (for example, when scientific methods “are unjustifiably taken as the supreme norm for arriving at truth”), it adds: “these drawbacks are not necessarily due to modern culture and they should not tempt us to overlook their positive values.” The Church, then, is not only or primarily concerned with the ethical judgment of particular procedures, but of developing with the scientific world a productive dialogue in which both can “discover the full sense of the commitment by which human culture becomes important in man's total vocation.”²² From this notion, that full and true humanity is reached by means of culture, it follows that scientific creativity, human living, and religion—all components of culture—should be linked closely together for mutually influential growth.

Curran believes that contemporary theology's stress on “a greater continuity between this world and the next...gives greater significance to man's life in the world.”²³ Human relationships and social structures can be revelatory and realized experiences of the future kingdom of God. A “greater appreciation of historicity and historical consciousness,”²⁴ makes the church aware of the relative or provisional

¹⁹ Curran, *Issues*, 114-119.

²⁰ *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 53-59, *Vatican II*, 958-64.

²¹ *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 44, *Vatican II*, 946.

²² *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 57, *Vatican II*, 961-62.

²³ Curran, *Dialogue*, 72.

²⁴ Curran, *Contemporary Problems*, 196.

character of theological and ethical insights, while giving “normative importance to the changing and contingent historical reality,”²⁵ which is the subject matter of the sciences. As scientific beliefs and attitudes build themselves into the ethos of society and scientists claim a role in shaping public policy, “science and technology” cannot be considered merely as data, because they have moved into the realm of human social, communitarian, and ethical meaning. From this insight, Curran argues that the impact of science on humanity constitutes a social responsibility that affirms the human’s “communitarian nature and his [or her] relationships with all other people and the world.”²⁶

Curran proposes that the normative value of science can only become operative through an ethical stance that reflects a fully human perspective. Christian ethics is concerned with “the criteria by which a Christian should judge his proper response to building the new heaven and the new earth.”²⁷ Decisions that that impact on the quality and future of human life point out the “need for reflective moral reasoning on the ways in which men make their ethical and human judgments, on the goals they choose, and the means to attain the goals.”²⁸ Moral theology also has a responsibility to facilitate the ability of non-specialists to evaluate the judgments of politicians, scientists in relation to the interests society and public policy.²⁹ In order to access the moral normativeness of science, Curran works out a stance that steers a middle road between moral pessimism and scientific utopianism.

The criteria he proposes for discerning this normativeness include attention to the social and cosmic dimensions of human reality and acknowledgement of human limits. Theology seeks a historical understanding of human nature in light of the possibilities represented by scientific advances. “The data of science, especially the human and behavioral sciences, enters into the establishment of moral values and norms.”³⁰ Theology, however, has to judge this knowledge “in the light of other perspectives and the total

²⁵ Curran, *Dialogue*, 73.

²⁶ Curran, *Contemporary Problems*, 199.

²⁷ Curran, *Contemporary Problems*, 238.

²⁸ Curran, *Dialogue*, 91.

²⁹ See Karl Rahner, “Zum Problem der genetischen Manipulation,” *Schriften zur Theologie*, Bd. VIII (Einsiedeln: Benziger Verlag, 1967), 286-321. Rahner points out the tendency to limit discussion to specialists, leaving the non-specialist feeling like uninitiated and excluded. Rahner calls for ethical reflection that does not depend on mastering scientific information with such insight and certainty that one might otherwise not be considered to be a respectable partner in the conversation.

³⁰ Curran, *Dialogue*, 78.

human perspective which transcends and thus judges all the more limited judgments which remain always relative to the final, synthesizing moral judgment.”³¹ The task of determining “how the conclusions and findings of science will enter into the moral judgment”³² requires a framework that relates to the scientific paradigm. The classicist horizon of a fixed nature, unchanging over time as the measure of morality is not an apt instrument for integrating the scientific and technological capability of human existence into a comprehensive Christian vision of the world.³³ Curran regards a stance built on the five-fold Christian mysteries as comprehensive enough to properly value the contribution of science to discovering human value.

The goodness of creation, the reality of the incarnation, and the hope of the future, encourage moral theology to search for convincing connections between scientific progress and “the transforming and future oriented aspects of the Christian vision of man and his world.”³⁴ But human experience abounds in examples of the misuse of power and the inability of human beings to anticipate all of the consequences of their actions. The total Christian perspective recognizes the limitations of creatureliness and sin. It also transcends historical time and reaches into God’s gracious future. “Insofar as the sciences merely tell us about the present they cannot adequately and completely fulfill a normative function.”³⁵

Curran’s thesis, that the data and conclusions of biomedical science need to be integrated into a larger context (a “truly human perspective”), taken in itself, seems to fall outside the historical consciousness that marks human relationships and responsibilities. It is true of every aspect of human progress in any time and place based as it is on formal criteria. When he asks, however, how “the data of

³¹ Curran, *Dialogue*, 81.

³² Curran, *Dialogue*, 91.

³³ Curran, *Contemporary Problems*, 197-200.

³⁴ Curran, *Dialogue*, 78.

³⁵ Curran, *Dialogue*, 79. It is worth noting in this context that Lonergan links factual knowledge and values much more integrally than Curran does here. Both are necessary for the exercise of effective freedom. “Man is free essentially inasmuch as possible courses of action are grasped by practical insight, motivated by reflection, and executed by decision.” Lonergan, *Insight*, 619. Kenneth Melchin explains that, in Lonergan’s thought, “knowledge of fact yearns to be integrated into action programs oriented toward improving the life conditions of people around the world.” The manner of combining knowledge of fact and knowledge of value is not by addition, but in “an operation of ordering an otherwise coincidental manifold of skills in accordance with a cognitional act.” Melchin, *History*, 147-48.

the sciences...enters into the establishment of moral values and norms,"³⁶ Curran inadvertently perhaps introduces a second meaning of science and technology and creates an ambiguity by the confusion of science as data and science as human experience. It is an ambiguity that also creates confusion over the role of moral theology—that of integrating scientific data into a more human perspective and that of discovering ethical wisdom in the scientific experience. To resolve this ambiguity, Curran needs to indicate how scientific knowledge alters the notions of human life contained in stance and how “the total Christian perspective”³⁷ offers a concrete standard to be used in determining how particular bio-medical or scientific possibilities share in God’s ongoing creation. Instead of addressing this issue, Curran talks around it.

In attempting to achieve the moral integration he proposes, Curran betrays a separatist view of ethics that only partially conforms to the exigences of historical consciousness. When he states that the conclusions and findings of science are normative insofar as they assist the ethicist in determining the values and the norms that influence decision-making,³⁸ he ignores that ethical dimension of scientific knowing, which Jonsen demonstrated was the impetus for the development of bioethics. Instead of a learning dialogue with a scientific community, aware of and seeking answers to the ethical concerns generated by their discoveries, Curran debates the utopian positions of Herman J. Muller and Joshua Ledenberg.³⁹

Their proposals for eugenic sperm banks and cloning are a response to the perceived genetic deterioration of the human race and the desire to eventually eliminate its biological imperfect. Curran finds that the assumptions behind these proposals reveal a stance that equates human worth with biological perfection and a consequentialist model that is prepared to sacrifice one generation for the happiness of some future, possible one. The Christian vision of man and his world, according to Curran, questions the compelling force of a scientific-ethical argument that is based on the hope that “biology or genetics

³⁶ Curran, *Dialogue*, 78.

³⁷ Curran, *Contemporary Problems*, 207.

³⁸ See Curran, *Dialogue*, 91. Curran treats “scientific knowledge” as findings, apart from the human knowledge of scientists. This is evident in the statement: “Even now the knowledge explosion coming from the findings of the sciences has created a human problem as man tried to find human meaning and intelligibility in the midst of so much data. ... The sciences in the future will only add to the complexity of the data and make even more crucial men’s search for meaning and intelligibility.”

³⁹ Curran, *Contemporary Problems*, 191-93.

will...completely overcome man's inherent limitations." In brief, Curran argues that the techno-scientific mindset, which is "a partial aspect of the whole reality," is in danger of identifying "the scientific with the human,"⁴⁰ and viewing "primarily in terms of effects and performances." It sees the person apart from all other human relationships, exclusively "in terms of utility or performance."⁴¹ Here Curran identifies the scientific perspective as seeing all reality in terms of genetics, repeating his call for a perspective broader than that of science, from which "man can control and direct the sciences to properly human values and goals."⁴²

Curran's perspectival judgment of the narrowness, consequentialism, and success ideal of science functions more as a negative critique, than as a constructive heuristic. Despite attempts to draw on faith-based insights to develop an operative understanding of the human and a critical approach to human progress,⁴³ Curran's critique does not meet the "need for a moral hermeneutic, which not only brings together the different perspectives of all the sciences but also deals with the disagreements existing within the same scientific perspective."⁴⁴

b. Critique: A stillborn partnership. A partnership, in which moral theology can "begin to learn how teachers of medicine, researchers and practitioners themselves understand the moral aspects of their practice,"⁴⁵ is thwarted by a theological stance that limits science as an ethical determinant. Curran had criticized the older, natural law approach for leaving little room for the normative function of science (as an aspect of historical consciousness) in human or moral decision-making. A rebuttal of the "scientific perspective" should include discussion of the "human experience" that led to the conclusions. Curran avoids this by means of a paradigm that limits the normative function of science to contributing data, which moral theology uses to understand "the changing contingent historical reality which is the subject matter of science."⁴⁶ Despite his attempts to recognize the impact of science on humanity's understanding of the world, human nature, and human knowledge, Curran's ethical approach remains within the traditional

⁴⁰ Curran, *Contemporary Problems*, 209-12.

⁴¹ Curran, *Contemporary Problems*, 213-14.

⁴² Curran, *Dialogue*, 80.

⁴³ Curran, *Dialogue*, 97-110.

⁴⁴ Curran, *Dialogue*, 87.

⁴⁵ Jonsen, *Bioethics*, 45.

⁴⁶ Curran, *Dialogue*, 73.

“silo,” which he criticizes. When science and ethics are kept so separate, the hope for partnership is not viable. This seems to be the consequence of the unresolved ambiguity between science as data and science as human experience.

Scientific utopias do not inherently threaten to substitute technology for human responsibility.

Curran recognizes the positive contribution that such ideas may make to ethics:

Utopias appeal to the imagination of responsible people to perceive in the present situation the disregarded possibilities within it and to provide directions toward a fresh future. Such an approach sustains the social dynamism by the confidence it gives to the inventive powers of the human mind and heart.⁴⁷

Instead of entering into a dialogue with the human experience, of which such proposals are trying to make sense, Curran, on the basis of stance (intentionally or not) rules out the ethical values that might be found in their arguments and ignores the potential that may be contained in the future hopes of genetic science. Nor does he integrate utopian thought into a more imaginative cognitive process, more apt to discern “the commitments and options...in the situation itself.”⁴⁸ Curran’s decision to deal with scientific utopias through predominantly negative criticism not only makes them incompatible with his Christian ethical and doctrinal horizon, but fails to point out any areas of contact, on which common ground might be found. The validity of human experience is thus diminished and its concerns left unexplored.⁴⁹

The dialogue could be furthered, I believe, had Curran supplemented the timelessness of stance with the historical-social considerations that are implied by his ethical model. Stance can only grasp the future dimension of human striving when it is given a historical-relational concreteness that does “justice to the communitarian, social, and cosmic needs of the present.”⁵⁰ The inquiry, for example, into social

⁴⁷ Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, 20.

⁴⁸ Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, 21.

⁴⁹ Curran pivots between supporting the use of utopias in ethical reflection and rejecting it. Usually Curran rejects utopian thinking, when he intends to stress some point about eschatology and the continuing presence in of limitations, sin, and tragedy in human living. His praise of utopias is often evident, when he is arguing in favor of pushing ethical reasoning beyond rationalistic thought structures toward more imaginative ones. Curran makes contradictory judgments about utopian thought. In my opinion, however, Curran’s inconsistency is not the most serious problem. That problem is Curran’s underestimation of the future in his methodology. Since the future is an inherent component of human experience and an integral part of human knowing—especially if one adopts a transcendental theory of cognitive structure and operation—it plays a critical role in ethical reflection that is rooted in historical consciousness.

⁵⁰ Curran, *Contemporary Problems*, 202.

responsibility and the need for some community control of revolutionary medical technologies,⁵¹ will inevitably seek processes for coming to know how to connect this power and ability with the process of shaping and contributing to the common good. Curran's terse observation that the perfection of human nature resides in God's unforeseeable future has little to say about the significance of humanity's unforeseeable, yet less distant future. The mutual dialogue between ethics and science will take place only when it is located in the concreteness of history and experience, so that it can be integrated into "the sum total of all those conditions of social life which enable individuals, families, and organizations to achieve complete and efficacious fulfillment."⁵²

One expects that a "fully human" perspective, that could help society direct science and technology to the fulfillment of its potential, would reflect the *mutual* influence of Curran faith and science. By itself, stance neither addresses nor answers the need to point out, at least in a provisional manner, the kinds of responses that suggest a Christian interpretation that could make this new, historical knowledge and power a sign of the times. This discernment requires a vision of the common good that can be shared, developed, and altered in a dialogue with the world. David Hollenbach maintains that moral theology has a two-fold task: "that of seeking a Christian interpretation of social reality and [that] of proposing concrete directions for Christian social action."⁵³ This prepares the way for transformative action, a Christian response "should have a transformative and redemptive impact on history, society and culture," made evident in the "building and consolidation of bonds of solidarity in society...and mutual independence among all people."⁵⁴

Gaudium et Spes sees the societal and temporal matrix of the human ability to alter the human future as driven by fundamental questions about the meaning of life and the desire for God.⁵⁵ This is the context in which Curran's model ought to explore a clearer vision of the common good that mediates the

⁵¹ Curran, *Contemporary Problems*, 203.

⁵² *Gaudium et Spes*, nn. 24, 76, *Vatican II*, 981, 984. This section of the pastoral constitution deals with the relation of the Church to the political community. It can, *mutatis mutandis*, throw light on the relationship between Catholic moral theology and the scientific community.

⁵³ David Hollenbach, "The Church's Social Mission in a Pluralistic Society," *Vatican II: the Unfinished Agenda*, ed. Lucien Richard, D.T. Harrington, J.W. O'Malley (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 124.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 117-18.

⁵⁵ *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 11, *Vatican II*, 912.

positive contributions of the technological and scientific community and brings them into relation with a “truly human” vision of the common good. The good of the person in all her relations—communitarian, social, ecological, and cosmic—is another way of referring to “the common good.” It goes without saying that moral theology’s attempt to envision the common good bears the marks of historical and cultural limitation. In order to proceed from perspective to responsible action, however, Christian ethics has a responsibility to at least imagine a social response that moves toward a greater realization of the values (found in the gospel and in human experience) that stem from their divine source and provide the contours of an answer to the question: What measures are recommended to building up society today?⁵⁶

3. *Christian ethics and the challenge of medical science.* The possibilities of molecular biology and genetics raise the broader human question: Is it ever necessary to say ‘no’ to what science makes possible?⁵⁷ The extent to which Curran’s emphasis on stance impacts on the ability of ethics to respond to this question can be seen in his evaluation of what he regards as ethical pessimism—a view which he finds in the writings of Paul Ramsey.⁵⁸ While insisting on a greater openness to a historical understanding of the human, Curran’s preference for treating specific issues in terms of individual autonomy and rights, without referencing these values to the moral ends of society, fails to achieve a perspective that would counter Ramsey’s concerns.

a. *Argument: Norms are not absolute--the critical function of stance and model.* Curran focuses on the historical meanings of the reality and values connected with bioethics and on three aspects of method: stance (eschatology, creation, human limitation), model, and person (anthropology). Ramsey’s position against both genetic manipulation and reproductive engineering is based on his understanding of: 1) parenthood and human procreation; 2) the sanctity of life and significance of the individual; 3) the

⁵⁶ Note that Curran’s five-fold mysteries assume a divine source of human values. “Creation” is certainly indicative of that source, as do “incarnation” and “redemption.”

⁵⁷ Curran’s essays that are under discussion here were written before the first successful gene splicing, which only occurred in 1973. The birth of the first child conceived by *in vitro* fertilization did not take place until 1978.

⁵⁸ Curran, *Politics*, 2. Curran’s search for adequate and consistent methodology and proper ethical and theological discourse for treating questions of scientific and technological interference in the passing on of human life is treated in two chapters of this book. Curran’s positions appear only indirectly, in his critical evaluations of Ramsey’s proposals in these areas.

unknown, unforeseen, and uncontrollable risks to future generations.⁵⁹ These procedures, amount to “thing-i-fying the carnal life” and replacing the natural process of procreation with an attitude of manufacturing humans.⁶⁰ Ramsey understands procreation and parenthood as joined to the bodily transmission of life through sexual intercourse--a personal and biological act. Because, humanly speaking, the realm of personal love and the realm of procreation belong together, one cannot separate the biological from the personal aspect of both parenthood and procreation.⁶¹

The issue of risk-prevention is an absolute norm for Ramsey, because, with no duty to use technological means to bring into the world a child that does not yet exist, there can be no justification of the risks that such a child may be exposed to. To create a life-at-risk constitutes a completely unnecessary violation of the integrity of the human person, especially not for the good of a non-patient, such as the future, the human race, the species or control over the evolutionary process.⁶²

Curran attributes Ramsey’s negative position to the theological assumptions that precede his argument: eschatology, anthropology, and ethical model, which Curran understands in the following manner. First, Ramsey’s eschatology does not see any continuity between God’s future and the human now and, thus, is not open to a positive relation between human endeavor and the kingdom of God. All human achievements will ultimately meet their apocalypse in God’s destruction of the world and the inauguration of the eternal kingdom.⁶³ Such a stance allows no theological mandate to do everything possible to improve the species or to avoid a genetic apocalypse. Neither is there a theological basis for integrating human progress with moral development.⁶⁴

Second, from a discontinuous eschatology flows an anthropology that views the human attempt to direct the evolutionary process as a refusal of human creatureliness, a sinful *hubris* or Babel, in which

⁵⁹ Paul Ramsey, *Fabricated Man: The Ethics of Generic Control* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 151-52.

⁶⁰ Ramsey, *Fabricated Man*, 135.

⁶¹ Ramsey ‘s view in this regard is not determined by any theological presuppositions. It reflects a version of “historical knowledge,” a common sense view based on experience and interpretation; see *Fabricated Man*, 136-37

⁶² Ramsey, *Fabricated Man*, 101.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 22-32.

⁶⁴ Curran, *Politics*, 175.

humans use all “their towering knowledge ...[to] play God.”⁶⁵ In the face of human fragility, Ramsey recommends establishing “right relations among men, justice and fidelity with one another,” over plotting a future where things turn out the way we want them to be.⁶⁶ Curran holds that Ramsey’s understanding of the human would see us embrace suffering and human limitation, rather than make attempts to alter the human species in order to avoid it.

Third, Ramsey’s ethical model is deontological, expressing itself as “an independent ethic of means, which denies that...ethical considerations can be reduced to consequences or the greatest net good for society.”⁶⁷ An independent ethics of means must be founded on an absolute value such as covenantal love, which Curran finds does not “give enough importance to the changing historical reality of the human.”⁶⁸

Curran proposes an alternative reading of eschatology, anthropology, and ethical model. Eschatology is prophetic and teleological, that is, it places the current situation in judgment and obliges human beings “strive to cooperate in the work of bringing about the kingdom.”⁶⁹ In this view “scientific and technological progress can be truly human progress and thus positively related to the kingdom.”⁷⁰ However, Curran’s eschatology cannot promise that such progress will not “place the truly human in jeopardy.” Eschatology does not provide a solution to human problems, but calls for the development of a “human vision...[to] control the possibilities of technology and make sure that its serves truly human needs and purposes.”⁷¹

The basis of moral discernment becomes the meaning of the “truly human.” Since for Curran the “fullness of the life of the resurrection” affects body and soul, the attempt to change or improve human existence affirms the goodness of creation. The human being is incomplete if creativity and freedom are arbitrarily limited. “Man is called upon today to make more decisions regarding his own life and his future

⁶⁵ Ramsey, *Fabricated Man*, 149-50.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 122.

⁶⁷ Curran, *Politics*, 220.

⁶⁸ Curran, *Politics*, 207.

⁶⁹ Curran, *Politics*, 201.

⁷⁰ Curran, *Politics*, 210.

⁷¹ Curran, *Politics*, 202.

in the world.”⁷² In a word, human beings cannot deal with their power and freedom by placing responsibility for their choices on external laws or distant ends. They must use their own reason to work out what is permitted or not, in process that includes relating the physical, biological, psychological, sociological, political, hygienic, and other aspects of human existence to the specific issues of genetic and reproductive engineering.⁷³ Only an ethical model that gives “importance to the creativity and the positive aspects of man...[and] to the changing, historical reality of the human”⁷⁴ can determine the truly human in relation to the overarching historical and social matrix that is constitutive of concrete human experience.

The question of the human is central to Curran’s approach to discerning moral responsibility, “because I [Curran] tend to see the work of God in man and the world and begin my ethical reflection from this reality and not exclusively from revelation about God.”⁷⁵ Curran considers the self-regulatory structure of human reason (following Lonergan) and the universality of grace (following Rahner) indicators that all human beings can arrive at ethical wisdom, that is an understanding of the “fully human” sufficient for moral responsibility. In this paradigm, the human good is found in reflective dialogue about what is reasonable and desirable in moving toward a more human world.

Curran’s eschatology, anthropology, and model throw ethical reflection back into the court of human reasonableness. These considerations do not determine whether genetic intervention is justified by some immediate good or has the potential for truly human purposes that are broader. Biblical teachings and theological presuppositions do not settle these issues, but direct Christian ethics to expand its historical understanding of the human and engage in rational discussion—shared with all other human beings—about the human meaning of what is happening and being proposed.

b. Critique: An autonomous ethics or moral theology? Curran suggests that the normative function of science lies in how it alters the self-consciousness of what it means to be a human being and thus broadens the compass of human responsibility. Historical knowledge of human nature, however, is not sufficient for ethical judgments, until it is submitted to critical reflection, which involves an encounter with scientific

⁷² Curran, *Politics*, 203.

⁷³ Curran, *Politics*, 205.

⁷⁴ Curran, *Politics*, 207.

⁷⁵ Curran, *Politics*, 207.

knowledge as moral judgment and not just data.⁷⁶ As Daniel Callahan points out, “there are no sharp lines between facts and values.”⁷⁷ That the same phenomena have different meanings to different people, reflecting differing interpretive horizons, merely states a fact and does not settle any ethical issues.⁷⁸

Curran’s attribution of his differences with Ramsey to their theological presuppositions, for example, does not adjudicate the differences nor does it make the “meaning of the human...crucial in the debate about man’s self-manipulation through genetic engineering,”⁷⁹ any clearer. Curran concedes that Ramsey’s principles (of non-exposure of a child-to-be to mishaps or irreparable harm and of natural parenthood or the non-separation of the biological and unitive aspects of procreation and parenthood) represent what is normal, desirable, and usual, but rejects the conclusion that would give them absolute normative force. Curran’s conclusions reflect the relativity of proportionate reasoning, commensurate risk, and double effect,⁸⁰ more than an eschatological-anthropological context, which has not been able to identify the “fully human.” Furthermore, it is not clear how Curran moves from historical consciousness and stance to ethical conclusions based on the meaning of the truly human. For example, Curran treats the risks to future generations of genetic manipulation as indirect, unintended, and justifiable, if necessary, as “collateral damage, which could be proportionate to the good attained.”⁸¹

These responses create a divide between theology and ethics, beg the question of the “truly human,” and raise concerns about the coherence between Curran’s method and conclusions. The autonomy

⁷⁶ In fact, what Curran treats as data (as in his discussion of human parenthood) is already interpretation. Human parenthood and the transmission of life are meaning-laden. Insight or first meaning corresponds to Lonergan’s second operation in the cognitional process. Insight can only become moral consciousness after it passes through reflection to responsibility.

⁷⁷ Daniel Callahan, “Bioethics,” *Encyclopedia of Bioethics*, rev. ed., vol. 1, ed. Warren T. Reich (New York: Macmillan, Simon and Schuster Macmillan, 1995): 247-56, 249.

⁷⁸ Curran assumes that the stance he employs adequately embodies what Lonergan calls horizon. In fact, Curran’s repetition of the five-fold mysteries hardly changes and expresses a static, formal structuring of reality for the purpose of not leaving out of the picture anything that is relevant to ethical reflection. For Lonergan, Horizon is a dynamic reality that evolves and develops through intellectual, moral, and religious conversions. Horizons, even those structured by Christian faith, are bounded and need to be transformed and complemented by other horizons. “Singly they [horizons] are not self-sufficient, and together they represent the motivations and the knowledge need for the functioning of a communal world.” Horizons must have a unifying or structuring rationale. Curran’s horizon, however, juxtaposes the five mysteries without providing what Lonergan refers to as a unifying context in which “must be fitted each new item of knowledge and each new factor in our attitudes.” See Lonergan, *Method*, 235-44.

⁷⁹ Curran, *Politics*, 204.

⁸⁰ See Curran, *Politics*, 169, 187.

⁸¹ Curran, *Politics*, 169.

of ethical reasoning around particular genetic proposals assumes, for Curran, that such reasoning involves discerning God's presence and activity in human actions. In the absence of theological criteria, human rationality becomes the primary source of moral truth and seems to equate "being human" with "being reasonable," without further qualification. Moral theology makes an at least implicit claim to be more than an autonomous ethics. Its purpose includes: 1) to give intelligence and understanding of human experience that is in harmony with Christian faith; 2) to clarify the truly human in terms of the eschatological call and destiny of humankind achieved in the resurrection of Christ; 3) to relate what human beings are doing in the world to the present activity of God in bringing about the world's transformation. Since Curran holds that one cannot proceed from faith (theology, the bible) directly to ethical conclusions, he must better demonstrate how the light of faith clarifies the meaning of the human and how the human deepens the understanding of what is believed. To do this, the mediating function of human reason needs to be complemented by the theological mediation of Christian beliefs.

Theology's rational conclusions, based on credible general ethical principles, have to be accountable and intelligible to the Christian community. The mediating task of a transcendental ethical approach cannot be completed on a purely philosophical basis, but demands a theological and religious component, which can link human experience back to what is believed. In other words, the assumption that reason reflecting on human experience can capture the moral dynamics implied by the notion of salvation history requires theological as well as philosophical verification. Curran's essays raise concerns regarding the coherence of the process of inquiry that he follows and the consistency between his presuppositions and his conclusions.

c. Critique: Curran's approach does not explore the social dimension of the "fully human." How adequate is Curran's approach for capturing the fullness of the human, social reality discussed by bioethics? He does not address the serious social issues involved in genetic risk-taking, although several authors without any theological pretense demonstrate such concern. Succinctly put: "While it is individuals who use these technologies, what they do with them affects us all."⁸² These issues include the commercialization of fertility, the commodification of the future child, the consequences of genetic alterations on the human

⁸² Somerville, 5.

species, and, more fundamentally, the impact of reproductive technologies on social values around the transmission of life and the ability to pass on respect for this process from one generation to the next.⁸³

Hans Jonas, for example, insists that if we recognize the technological power humanity now possesses, the scope of what is deemed to be human responsibility has to be broadened beyond the interpersonal and immediate to include the consequences of technological decisions that go beyond our own life span. The impact of human action and of human planning lead Jonas to a theory of technology rooted in an imperative of historical responsibility, making the locus of decision-making societal.⁸⁴ He calls for an ethics that can influence public policy and enable human beings to recognize their power and responsibility for the outcomes implicit in every choice of technological progress, an ethics that can evoke a “political morality.”⁸⁵

When reproductive technologies become normal practice included under the definition of health care and available in public hospitals or private clinics, access to these technologies becomes a question of rights. The possibility of conflict between the rights of an individual, couple or group who want a child and the well-being of the potential child may be more difficult to regulate than Curran indicates, reopening the question of the meaning of parenthood and the role of society and the state in protecting children.⁸⁶

Granted that Curran is writing at an early stage in the development of bioethics, the promise of Curran’s methodology and the needs articulated by Vatican II for a fruitful dialogue with the world go largely unfulfilled. The model of relationality-responsibility is not employed to include the broader social concerns pointed out by Somerville or to bring the present and future into a clearer relationship as Jonas has suggests. Both authors surface the need for the formation of a public ethics that can regulate the persuasive power of biomedical technologies.

It is not my purpose to demonstrate how Curran should have treated these social issues, but to explore what, if anything in his method accounts for the absence of the social ethical dimension of

⁸³ Ibid., 23-24.

⁸⁴ Hans Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 79-177.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 122.

⁸⁶ Somerville, 47-53.

medicine and genetics. Curran purports to begin with the reality of “the work of man,”⁸⁷ specifically several conflict situations arising from biomedical procedures. That reality is perceived from a stance informed by the content, as Curran understands it, of the Christian mysteries. These mysteries serve solely formally to structure the Christian’s knowledge of reality.⁸⁸ Stance, then, does not reveal values or indicate what is valuable in the historically and religious complexity of reality. Richard Grecco, in his detailed study of Curran’s methodology, shows “that Stance [only] becomes specified through a dialectic with Model and with an appreciation of [human] growth as conversion... Both of these steps are necessary to consolidate a critical consciousness on which to base a particular judgment.”⁸⁹ In Curran’s methodology moral meaning is supposed to emerge through understandings facilitated by the reflective operations of model and person. However, what Grecco finds in analyzing Curran’s theory of compromise seems to be repeated in Curran’s ethical treatment of biomedical progress: “data relevant to Model and Person was not accounted for.”⁹⁰

With these limitations to stance, the neglect of model and person in structuring ethical analysis undermines the integrity of Curran’s method.⁹¹ When Curran moves from stance to a calculus of risks and benefits, he formulates concrete moral norms for human situations that stance has described only as complex, ambivalent, yet hopeful. The connection, for example, between the insight of stance that some scientific advances may be positively related to the kingdom of God (and some may not) and the conclusion that artificial insemination with donor sperm may sometimes be permissible leaves a methodological gap that is difficult to account for. Precisely because Curran is concerned with the tension and conflict inherent in human experience,⁹² the neglect of the steps of model and person leaves out information and understandings that are essential, by the standards of his own methodology, for arriving at responsible conclusions.

Relationality-responsibility in these essays deals with the relationship between conflicting values and does not explore the relationships between persons, groups of persons, nature, and God. Person

⁸⁷ Curran, *Politics*, 207.

⁸⁸ Curran, *New Perspectives*, 56.

⁸⁹ Grecco, *A Theology of Compromise*, 202-03; see 146.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 207.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 202.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 203.

(anthropology) is described in generalities about human creativity and freedom that only reiterate the tension and ambiguity of human experience already underlined by stance. The social dimension of responsibility and the faith-informed, historically emergent criteria of authentic human value remain unexamined.

4. *Summary: Stance is not enough--a truly human perspective must be historically relevant.* Curran's ethical reflections on bioethics focus almost exclusively on stance, with little variance in his conclusions, although the essays span a period of several years.⁹³ The ahistorical character of stance, along with a patterned approach that reiterates "an overall perspective" and does not descend "into the particulars which should characterize guidelines and without an exhaustive discussion of all the possible case,"⁹⁴ prevents Curran from answering the question on which the correctness of his moral judgment depends: what is the authentically human?

The almost exclusive attention that is paid to stance in these essays produces incoherence between process and inquiry. Curran intends "to give intelligibility and understanding to the more basic question of why the problems [associated with bio-medical progress] constitute ethical questions and dilemmas"⁹⁵ and to describe the effects of the developments in biomedicine and medical technologies on ethical methodology.⁹⁶ The historical evolution of emergent human power to interfere with nature brings with it a new understanding of what it means to be a human being (corresponding to the mystery of creation). It provides substance to what it means to "share in the power, the goodness, and the Glory of God"⁹⁷ in the creative work of humanization and liberation of the world, of contributing to peace and justice (redemption).⁹⁸ Curran is confident that modern science can, as Aristotelian philosophy did for Catholic theology in the Middle Ages, be integrated with theology "to explain and understand better the mysteries of

⁹³ Charles E. Curran, "Human Experimentation," *Issues*, 71-102; "Genetics and the Human Future," *Issues*, 103-136; "In Vitro Fertilization and Embryo Transfer," *A Continuing Journey*, 112-140; "The Contraceptive revolution and the Human Condition," *A Continuing Journey*, 141-172; "Biomedical Science and the Human Future," *Critical Concerns*, 99-122; "Moral Theology in Dialogue with Biomedicine and Bioethics," *Toward an American*, 65-90.

⁹⁴ Curran, *Issues*, 99.

⁹⁵ Curran, *Critical Concerns*, 101.

⁹⁶ Curran, *Toward an American*, 66.

⁹⁷ Curran, *Critical Concerns*, 107.

⁹⁸ Curran, *Critical Concerns*, 112.

the Christian faith.”⁹⁹ However, without a more detailed historical understanding of this reality—in terms of the steps of model and person--what Curran says about scientific progress can be said about any advance and at any time in human history, but offers little justification for his hope in another Thomistic leap.

In order to further the inquiry into the normative function of science in Roman Catholic ethics, Curran would have had to historicize stance, so that it could comprehend the positive dimension of the utopianism of scientific thinking and move his understanding of humanness into the social meaning of person and community. While he is theologically correct in eschewing scientific materialism and naïveté, the rejection of utopias removes from the discussion the historical dynamism of the advent of the human future and restricts moral theology’s ability to engage in creative and imaginative thinking. Curran is aware of this problematic, as is evident in his argument that traditional natural law approaches do not work when nature is no longer a fixed reality. However, the abstract formality of stance effectively removes the future from the consideration of genetic and medical technological issues. Consequently, he is forced to turn to the past for guidance. “Even some of the most spectacular possibilities [of genetics] are governed by the basic moral principles developed in the past.”¹⁰⁰ Catholic tradition “indicates that for the most part human reason has been the primary basis for the teaching proposed in medical ethics” and this is “well illustrated” by the teachings of Pope Pius XII,¹⁰¹ where science remains an object to be judged by ethics.

Curran’s appeal to a tradition that relies almost totally on a rationalistic process tends to leave the broader historical-societal context out of view. The impetus of the Council to integrate the bible into moral theology has been reduced to statements too general to capture the historical possibilities of genetics or to identify the normative value of human-scientific experience. The absence of the future, social dimension of biological progress in Curran’s studies reflects his understanding of the eschatological condition of humanity.¹⁰² The present-future tension that Curran sees in historical experience is disconnected from the past historical person of Jesus and the future coming of the kingdom, making it difficult to identify any present human action in continuity or not with the saving work of God. The resulting ambiguity prevents

⁹⁹ Curran, *Critical Concerns*, 106.

¹⁰⁰ Curran, *Toward An American*, 69.

¹⁰¹ Curran, *Continuing Journey*, 113.

¹⁰² Curran, *Continuing Journey*, 154-56; *Critical Concerns*, 111-14; *Toward an American*, 70-76.

ethics from reaching any binding conclusions about what the world, individual or social human life can and, therefore, ought to be in the dynamic present. Curran's position is rationalist and humanistic.

[The] eschatological vision of itself does not give sufficient content to what is truly human progress, but it furnishes some parameters for the discussion. As in much of Catholic moral theology, the content aspect comes in through the mediation of human reason.¹⁰³

If stance only furnishes parameters or provides what Hauerwas describes as vague theological generalities,¹⁰⁴ then in the end one is left to make judgments with a rational calculus of good and evil, which leaves "us wondering if anything is left for moral reflection to do."¹⁰⁵

Stance alone does not provide the collective, relational, or historical dimension that is necessary for responding ethically in a given situation. It cannot answer Curran's question: "How does this progress in biomedicine relate to the reign of God?"¹⁰⁶ Unless the relational and transformational meaning and function of the five-fold mysteries pass through the critical reflection implied by the methodological steps of model and person and lead to some standard, such as the kingdom of God, Christian ethics is unable to allow "the human" to take on normative meaning. Curran's ethical analysis of the new medical science and biotechnology leaves out these steps, so that the conclusions reached do not cohere with the process of inquiry Curran proposes.

Curran regards the complexity of social situations in perspectival terms that emphasize conflict of values, sin, and an eschatological "not yet" that leaves human choice hanging between the greater or lesser good or evil. Jean Porter points out the dilemma of such a construal of the ethical situation: "How do we determine, in any situation, what counts as the greater good or lesser evil?"¹⁰⁷ Porter does not think this is possible without some "normative standpoint by which to determine which, out of all the logically possible

¹⁰³ Curran, *Toward an American Catholic Moral Theology*, 75.

¹⁰⁴ Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, n. 12, 159-60. Hauerwas accuses Curran of using the five-fold Christian mysteries as abstractions. "Curran seems to assume that the meaning of these abstractions is clear and that the theologian's task is basically to see that some are not emphasized to the expense of others....But Curran's use of these terms turns them into lifeless abstractions" that require a greater exposition and definition through the narratives that serve as their sources.

¹⁰⁵ Jean Porter, "Basic Goods and the Human Good in Recent Catholic Moral Theology," *The Thomist* 57 (1993), 45.

¹⁰⁶ Curran, *Toward an American*, 74.

¹⁰⁷ Porter, 44.

candidates, are the true goods (and evils) *in a given set of projected courses of action*.”¹⁰⁸ For Curran this standard is “the human,” described as that which can “make and keep human life more human,” can “bring about a more humane existence.”¹⁰⁹ For “the human” or “eschatological humanity” to provide a normative standpoint for Christian responsibility and to contribute toward an ethical hermeneutic of history, Curran must express its meaning in terms of the complex social and institutional relationships that are constitutive of society and express a sense of the common good. He has to move his reflections beyond quandary ethics, into an ethics of life and of creatively building the new heaven and the new earth.

Curran’s meaning of the “fully human” remains obscure. As a result his ethics fails, as Catholic theology, to connect hope of the eschatological future along with the science- based hopes of historical progress and the concrete conclusions he reaches. The theological task of helping the church recognize and embrace the absolute mystery of the world in the possibilities that science enables is left incomplete.¹¹⁰ This hope must be further contextualized through a strong set of social criteria to guide Christians and society in using science to make life more human.¹¹¹ In order to locate genetic and reproductive advances in positive continuity with the future kingdom, moral theology can examine their impact on building up social solidarity, on the social awareness and responsibility for the natural environment, and on understanding the particular and specific bond that relates creature to creator.¹¹² These concerns provide a way of bringing the potential and risks of medical technology into the arena of social ethics. The model of relationality-responsibility would be a preeminent help in examining how life and human relationships are affected by the prospects opened up by scientific and technological progress. A model rooted in covenant theology and positive about the continuity of human endeavors and the future kingdom, should be an apt instrument for evaluating new technologies as possible signs of broader justice, greater freedom, stronger solidarity in the world, and increased openness to and service of others.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 47 (emphasis mine).

¹⁰⁹ Curran, *American Catholic Moral Theology*, 67.

¹¹⁰ See Rahner, “Experiment Mensch,” 260-285.

¹¹¹ Karl Lehmann, *Der Mensch: sein eigener Schoepfer?* (Augsburg: German Bishops’ Conference, March 7, 2001) www.dbk.de, downloaded February 4, 2002.

¹¹² See John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, 1995 March 25 (www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/do.../hf_jp-ii_enc_25031995_evangelium-vitae_en.htm) downloaded April 2, 2002.

B. War and Peace: Who is included in the Common Good?

Since John XXIII's revolutionary encyclical *Pacem in Terris*, the Roman Catholic Church has sought a more constructive framework than the just war theory for dealing with the urgent need for peace. Such a goal implies the need for a theological hermeneutic of political and international experience that exposes the movement of God in the world and how the pilgrim Church, following that lead, can be a sign for humanity on its journey toward God.¹¹³ To be a credible sacrament of the transcendental humanity to which the world is called, the church pursues ways to relate to and dialogue with the various national states, the international community, and its own members about the causes of war and its alternatives. The general paradigm for this process is peace--thought of in terms of a universal common good, a concrete state of affairs and relationships to be worked for. Christians, the church, governments, and inter-governmental blocks and alliances share responsibility for peace. In the current historical situation, this includes effective commitments to the resolution of the grave inequities between the rich and poor of the world and developed and under-developed nations.

1. *War and pacifism.*

a. Just war theory: a historical approach. In articulating a theory of social ethics, Curran points out the need for both change of heart and change of structures and institutions. This two-fold responsibility may not be dichotomized, assigning heart-change to individuals and interpersonal groups, and structural and institutional change to government, industry, and business. The church's vocation to serve the kingdom of God and the world entails developing ethical approaches to the question of war that effectively relate the change of heart and structural change that are integral to the moral task of peace-making.

Within the Catholic Church itself, as well as the broader Christian tradition, there exists another dichotomy--the ethical divergence between Christian pacifism and the just war theory, especially in the last few decades.¹¹⁴ Both positions have been described as "distinct but interdependent methods of evaluating

¹¹³ *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 40, *Vatican II*, 939-40.

¹¹⁴ Cahill notes that as late as 1956 Pius XII, after recognizing a limited understanding of a just war, warned that "a Catholic citizen cannot invoke his own conscience in order to refuse to serve and fulfill those duties the law imposes." Lisa Sowle Cahill, *Love Your Enemies: Discipleship, Pacifism, and Just War Theory* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 207.

warfare. Both find their roots in the Christian theological tradition; each contributes to the full moral vision we need in pursuit of a human peace.”¹¹⁵ Two related but distinct issues are part of the contemporary Catholic ethical discussions: the commitment of the church to peace making and the status of pacifism as a norm for Christian behavior.

The longevity of the just war theory, at home in the Roman Catholic Church for over fifteen centuries, gives it special significance. In its Augustinian version, it is founded on the love commandment; in its scholastic form, the just war theory is rooted in natural law and the criteria that have become classic: just cause, competent authority, comparative justice, last resort, probability of success, proportionality, non-combatant immunity.¹¹⁶ However, in light of the enormous differences between the middle ages and the contemporary international relationships, the limited modern state, and the destructive force of technologically sophisticated and nuclear weapons, it is legitimate for a Christian to ask whether the just war theory still embodies the Christian judgment of war or to what extent must the criteria change in light of the new circumstances of war.

The key idea in Curran’s approach is his presupposition that the church, on the basis of Christian moral reasoning, cannot conclude that war is absolutely immoral.¹¹⁷ There are times when the state has a moral obligation to make war, albeit as a last resort, in order to create or secure conditions required for peace and justice. The church must support a government decision to make war, when all the norms and criteria for a just war are met.¹¹⁸ Curran’s views accord with the traditional just war teaching of the church, but are nuanced to reflect the general lines developed by Vatican II and the more specific lines developed

¹¹⁵ *The Challenge of Peace: God’s Promise and Our Response* (National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1983), par. 120-121; www.osjspm.org/cst/cp.htm, downloaded 2001 November 8.

¹¹⁶ Cahill, *Love Your Enemies*, 3.

¹¹⁷ Curran states this as a negative statement: “nations today are not called to pacifism” and in the inference that the “Catholic church as the primary example of a church [in opposition to sect] urges its members to accept responsibility for the world in which they live...At times in this imperfect world this responsibility might call for the use of force to defend the nation or prevent a proportionate injustice.” Charles E. Curran, *The Living Tradition*, 241.

¹¹⁸ Curran draws upon the typology of Troeltsch and Weber to describe sect as “a small, exclusive, religious group that emphasizes rigorous ethical standards, sees itself in opposition to the world and culture, and is determined not to compromise its pure ideals.” Although Curran thinks that the Roman Catholic church now “recognizes a greater pluralism” in moral issues, so that Catholic morality does not exclude pacifism or conscientious objection as a possible option, he maintains that the Church cannot exclude war as a moral option, because “Catholicism by its very nature emphasizes the universal and involvement with the world.” *The Living Tradition*, 62-65, 242-43.

by the U. S. bishops in their pastoral letter *The Challenge of Peace*. What is important for this study is how Curran's revisionist natural law approach—stance, model, person, and decision-making—influence the conclusions he reaches.

Curran writes at a time when concerns arising from the American war in Vietnam, the Cold War, and the arms race often polarized the church and public into bellicose and anti-war camps. The risks and dangers of modern warfare are enormous. Curran argues that the church has an obligation and a right to speak out on war and, in public discourse, “to try to clarify and enunciate...intermediate goals, values, and attitudes which should be present in the situations,” which require human pragmatic choice and action.¹¹⁹ The social mission “to develop this earth...[believing that] it is here that the body of a new human family grows, foreshadowing in some way the age which is to come,”¹²⁰ obliges the church to clarify particular, contingent choices in terms of the overarching orientation of the whole person toward God and of building human society with the coming of the kingdom of God. The issue of war and Christian hope can be brought together, according to Curran, by means of many of the concepts that are part of the just war theory (justice, discrimination, proportionality, and legitimate authority).

War ethics may not be read as “a consistent deduction from the new foundation laid by Christ.”¹²¹ Curran rejects the attempt to attempt to apply single biblical values, such as *agape* or non-resistance, normatively to the discussion of war as methodologically inadequate. Just war ethics is a historical and changeable process that Christians have undergone and continue to undergo in attempting to deal with something that as far as possible must be kept outside of “the category of reasonable human behavior.” Each time the option of war becomes real for a state, Christians must view war's possibility from a full human perspective and “agonize with the reluctant decision of accepting war as the only possible solution.”¹²² Ethical discourse must clearly link the killing and destruction with human responsibility.

Since Curran's approach makes use of an understanding of mediation that sees working for a more just social order in continuity with the coming kingdom of God, it follows that a declaration of war is of

¹¹⁹ Curran, *The Living Tradition*, 54.

¹²⁰ *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 39, *Vatican II*, 938.

¹²¹ Curran, *The Living Tradition*, 73.

¹²² Curran, *The Living Tradition*, 80.

interest to the Christian ethicist, because it relates, positively or negatively, to the activity of God in the world. Therefore, moral theology does more than “clarify moral discourse and moral concepts.” It interprets the state and statecraft in ethical categories, chief among which is justice. Just war theory involves a discussion of justice in relation to the “political, social, and cultural circumstances of the time.”¹²³ Of course, for the meaning and claims of justice to serve as mediating concepts, they must be the same for both the Christian and others.

The criterion of “last resort” is an example of mediation through reflecting on what is reasonable human behavior. This determination requires factual substantiation and, methodologically, must be argued out “on the basis of human reason and our perception of justice.”¹²⁴ The discussion will not avoid the tension that exists between the push of violence and the pull of non-violence, the justification of war and pacifism, but will employ a perspective that allows this tension to emerge and place the government and the citizens in a situation of responsibility for their choice.¹²⁵ Only after the facts have been considered and responsibility is taken for the full human impact of a decision, can one link one’s choice reflectively to God.¹²⁶ Christian social ethics is a process that occurs “through theologians and scientists dialoging together about specific political policies.”¹²⁷ Stance reminds us that “the sacredness of human life remains the cornerstone of human existence in the world” and that killing and other evils that are generated by war can only be justified “with great reluctance, as a last resort, with some truly overriding value to be obtained.”¹²⁸ Curran underlines the mysteries of creation (sacredness of life), sin, and eschatology in approaching the discussion of war. The social reality of sin, in which one nation or group unjustly and with deadly force aggresses against another group, limits the kind of peace and the means to it that are available to a nation in any concrete instance. Every solution will always fall short of the eschatological ideal and only partially and imperfectly manifest peace.¹²⁹ Although Curran describes the state as a “natural society built on human nature,” in which the dignity and freedom of the person, the image of God, find the

¹²³ Curran, *The Living Tradition*, 71-2.

¹²⁴ Curran, *The Living Tradition*, 73.

¹²⁵ Curran, *The Living Tradition*, 77.

¹²⁶ Curran, *The Living Tradition*, 34-45.

¹²⁷ Curran, *The Living Tradition*, 48.

¹²⁸ Curran, *The Living Tradition*, 78.

¹²⁹ Curran, *The Living Tradition*, 242.

conditions to flourish,¹³⁰ he concedes that this hallmark of peace is not even “minimally” achieved by force. Ethical discussion must place the purposes of war alongside the realistic expectations of its success, acknowledging the limits of military force for building a social order based on truth, justice, freedom, and love. However, there is little in the discussion to suggest that Curran uses the relation-response model to clarify this requirement of a just war.

Critical reasoning seeks middle ground between the rhetoric of militarism and the claims of pacifism. The former distorts social values and tends to view the common good “only in terms of the short run...[and of] a particular society as isolated from the total human community.”¹³¹ The latter denies that “war can be an instrument of justice,” affirming that in the ethical consideration of conflict, peace always trumps justice. He urges skepticism toward language that promises that technology can somehow make war appear clean, efficient, and sanitized killing. On the other hand, Curran views the “force or war ...[as] a non moral evil that at times can be justified on the basis of proportionality.”¹³² When applied to nuclear deterrence, the question of justification becomes more specific: are there proportionate reasons for the use of nuclear weapons?

b. Nuclear deterrence: a proportionalist approach. In the early 1980s, when the American Catholic bishops addressed the more concrete issues of nuclear threat and use, ethical attention shifted to nuclear weapons. According to David Hollenbach: “The post-Hiroshima teachings [of the Catholic Church] have been less detailed than one might expect in addressing the question of whether nuclear weapons might ever be legitimate means in the conduct of war.”¹³³ Pius XII raised the question, but did not answer it. John XXIII recalled the human horror of war’s destructive potential, but gave no detailed analysis of nuclear war. Although Vatican II “affirmed one of the strongest norms of the just war theory—that of discrimination or non-combatant immunity from direct attack—in a way clearly relevant to the issue of the use of nuclear weapons,” it did not deal with whether the use of nuclear weapons could be proportionate or controllable.¹³⁴

¹³⁰ Curran, *The Living Tradition*, 246.

¹³¹ Curran, *The Living Tradition*, 249.

¹³² Curran, *The Living Tradition*, 243.

¹³³ David Hollenbach. “*The Challenge of Peace in the Context of Recent Church Teachings*,” *Catholics and Nuclear War*, ed. Philip J. Murnion (New York: Crossroad, 1983): 8.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 10.

John Paul II extended the Church's concern to the whole technical-scientific-military aspects of modern warfare and not just nuclear weapons. In the meantime, the development of "tactical, intermediate range, and precision guided strategic nuclear weapons"¹³⁵ gave rise to the belief that indiscriminate use of nuclear force could now be avoided. According to Hollenbach, the challenge facing the church at this time and the task before the United States bishops in preparing a pastoral statement on peace was to move the Catholic teaching into the area of the more complex and specific questions of how these weapons "might be used and to draw appropriate conclusions for public policy."¹³⁶

Curran's thinking on nuclear war is found in his reviews of *The Challenge of Peace* (1983), the U.S. bishops' pastoral on peace and war. He notes that the bishops affirm the teaching of the Roman *magisterium*, but go beyond it on substantive issues, in search of solutions that reflect the human experience that is specific to the church of a particular culture or nation. The Roman teachings emphasize peace as a priority for the world and for the social mission of the church. In light of new weaponry, however, they call for a re-evaluation of war as an apt means to vindicate violated rights. They note the need for effective international structures and institutions, international law, and a universal public authority to prohibit war and safeguard peace. The world needs a new caution and vigilance. The risks and cost of the arms race are described as intolerable.

Conscious of the threatening reality of this historical context, Catholic teachings on war and peace recognize non-violence and pacifism for the first time as legitimate Catholic approaches. Simultaneously, the magisterium recognizes the right of nation states, in the absence of an effective international peace keeping authority, to take the necessary means to deter threats to their security. Thus, the legitimacy of non-violence is conditioned by the requirement that it not be detrimental to the rights or duties of others or the state. Curran notes that the just war theory is not abandoned in this teaching nor is the church prepared to request the unilateral disarmament of any nation or to absolutely condemn the use of nuclear weapons.

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¹³⁵ Ibid., 9.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 11.

¹³⁷ Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, 198-99

Curran describes *The Challenge of Peace* as “the most important and significant document ever issued by the American bishops.”¹³⁸ Their unconditional acceptance of nonviolence as a personal option, careful condemnation of nuclear weapons, and explicit interpretation of the just war theory as endorsing a presumption against war, move the bishops beyond the parameters of Catholic doctrine thus far. The letter includes the complexity and tension of public opinion, values divergent ethical views, and reflects the difficulty of finding a single Christian response to complex social problems. Tensions stem from differences between U.S. hierarchy’s position and that of the Vatican and other national hierarchies, from polarities existing between the bellicose and pacifist positions in their own Church, from pressures to participate in public debate as loyal citizens and the possibility of disagreement with government policy positions, and issues of ethical theory that unfolded in the composition of each draft. Although the letter is clearly focused on the value and process of peace, the bishops devote a significant part of their letter to the moral limits of nuclear use and deterrence within a just war theory. They note their own, or any single position on the morality of war, ought not to be identified or confused with the Gospel message.¹³⁹

Curran regards this sensitivity as evidence of historical consciousness and a factor in the bishops’ attempt to understand the principles of catholic social teaching concretely, within the historical and political situation of the cold war that made the Soviet Union and the United States mutual threats.¹⁴⁰ Despite a strong bias in favor of peace and against the use of nuclear weapons, Curran notes, “the bishops do not absolutely reject counterforce nuclear weapons...in response to a nuclear attack.”¹⁴¹ He then zeroes in on the moral reasoning the bishops followed in their skillful, dialectical discussion of the principles of proportionality and of discrimination, as well in their willingness to be specific and, to that extent, inductive. The bishops condemn nuclear war, first-use nuclear attack, and any attack against civilian populations, but fall short of condemning all limited nuclear war and reluctantly accept deterrence “not as an end in itself, but as a step on the way to progressive disarmament.”¹⁴² Curran indicates his conviction that the bishops sought a total condemnation of nuclear weapons and investigates how their methodology

¹³⁸ Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, 196.

¹³⁹ *The Challenge of Peace*, nn. 7-11.

¹⁴⁰ Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, 178.

¹⁴¹ Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, 180.

¹⁴² Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, 191.

led to compromise and prevented their objective.¹⁴³ Although they are “highly skeptical”¹⁴⁴ of the possibility of containment and believe that any use of nuclear weapons entails “unjustifiable moral risk in any form,”¹⁴⁵ they wind up supporting a limited deterrence policy.

The bishops’ acceptance of limited use and nuclear deterrence, Curran argues, is linked to their adherence to absolute moral norms and the deductive reasoning that they entail.¹⁴⁶ The principle of discrimination condemns all direct killing of noncombatants. The bishops requested and were assured by the U.S. government that there were self-imposed “moral, political, and military reasons [for the U.S. not targeting] the Soviet civilian population as such.”¹⁴⁷ In other words, the principle of discrimination would be respected. Another absolute for the bishops is the principle that only what can be morally carried out, may be morally threatened. Since they have allowed the ethical possibility of nuclear deterrence (threat), they are forced to accept the possibility that some use of nuclear weapons might be morally justified.

Curran’s model understands the moral life as a matter of relationality and responsibility. This model, he suggests, would have permitted the bishops to adopt their preferred position (that nuclear weapons should never be used). Instead of proceeding from the absolute principles of natural law, they would start from a historicist, proportionalist position.¹⁴⁸ In this approach “the primary ethical mode... is one of relationships and responsibility rather than obedience to norms and principles,”¹⁴⁹ permitting the inductive argument that there are no currently known circumstances in which nuclear counterattacks can be

¹⁴³ Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, 192-94; Charles E. Curran, “The Moral Methodology of the Bishops’ Pastoral,” *Catholics and Nuclear War: A Commentary on ‘The Challenge of Peace’ the U.S. Bishops’ Pastoral Letter on War and Peace*, ed. Philip J. Murnion (New York: Crossroad, 1983) 45-56.

¹⁴⁴ *The Challenge of Peace*, nn. 157, 193.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, n. 194.

¹⁴⁶ See Curran, “Moral Methodology,” 53. It should be noted that the writing process involved many clarifications of fact and the letter acknowledges the abundance of hypothetical scenarios that make the determination of fact more difficult. The bishops’ method, while maintaining the inviolability of certain moral principles, has a realistic empirical foundation. The bishops offer no final answers, but have attempted to create a place for a public, moral dialogue about U.S. military and defence policy. I have already noted in the text that Curran recognizes this quality of the letter’s methodology.

¹⁴⁷ Letter from the US national security advisor to Cardinal Bernardin, quoted in Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, 190.

¹⁴⁸ Charles Curran, “Human Dignity and the National Right to Self-Defence: American Catholic Bishops and the Nuclear Question,” *De Dignitate Hominis: Festschrift fuer Carlos-Josephat Pinto de Oliveira*, ed. Adrian Holderegger, Ruedi Imbach, Raul Suarez de Miguel (Freiburg Schweiz: Universitaetsverlag, 1987): 567-578.

¹⁴⁹ Curran, “Moral Methodology,” 53.

legitimately launched. According to this position, norms (such as the principle of discrimination) are not, in fact, based on absolute moral truth, but on conditioned truth. In other words, at the time the principles were formulated, there existed “no proportionate reason to justify” any direct killing of noncombatants.¹⁵⁰ The principle of discrimination can and must be defended as a historically reasonable and necessary moral norm “on proportionalist grounds.”¹⁵¹ This argument presupposes that created goods or values are always in relationship to other goods and so “finite created goods cannot be absolutized.” The good of life is a premoral good, to go against which is “a nonmoral evil...[which] can be justified for a proportionate reason.” In the case of nuclear retaliation, no reason is commensurate with the destruction of life caused by such an attack. The lack of strategic intelligence, the absence of certitude regarding outcome, and the danger of abuse mean the good to be accomplished remains indeterminate. Nor is there any certainty that the good effect intended by the killing of noncombatants would actually follow from that action. Curran concludes, the moral norm of noncombatant immunity is “practically [based on a study of fact] exceptionless,” so much so that noncombatant immunity warrants legal protection and authoritative enforcement.¹⁵²

Logically, Curran points out, this practically exceptionless norm should result in the condemnation also of nuclear deterrence. However, this supposes unchanging validity of the principle that one may not morally threaten what one may not morally do. Curran would not, as the bishops did, relate “use and deterrence so very closely,” for that leads to a position “that prevents their total condemnation of the use of nuclear weapons.”¹⁵³ He counters that “there is a great separation between the order of deterrence and the order of use...[and that] so great is this distinction that to threaten to deter does not necessarily involve a moral intention to use.” Thus, one “could maintain an absolute prohibition against all use of nuclears...but still accept some deterrence.”¹⁵⁴

¹⁵⁰ Curran, “Moral Methodology,” 53.

¹⁵¹ Curran, *Tensions* 146.

¹⁵² Curran, *Tensions*, 144-48.

¹⁵³ Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, 193-4.

¹⁵⁴ Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, 194-5.

Although at the time of the publication of *The Challenge of Peace*, Curran “personally lean[ed] toward”¹⁵⁵ this position (sometimes referred to as a “theory of bluff”), he later repudiates it, after reconsidering the relevant data.

To make the threat real at least someone in the chain of command would have to have the moral intention to use the weapons. From a moral perspective it does not seem that the order of deterrence and the order of use can be separated so much. Likewise, in practice it would seem that if one was threatening to use the weapons, then in the time of need one would as a matter of fact use the weapons... The dilemma of nuclear deterrence continues to exist both in theory and practice.¹⁵⁶

He then attempts to find some way of justifying deterrence, “in the light of a theology of compromise,”¹⁵⁷ which would allow particular actions, “which under ordinary conditions” one would not do.¹⁵⁸ However, he does not pursue this thought.

In arriving at a virtually exceptionless moral norm prohibiting the use of nuclear weapons Curran exposes a divergence between his theoretical construal of ethical model and its practical application—a divergence that warrants some examination. Curran’s practical preference for a relationality-responsibility ethical model assumes that the ordering of goods and values can be based on historically possible relationships, within a temporal-social matrix, in which the social meaning and dynamics of God’s divine interaction with history are approximated. Curran’s methodological premises for model require that individual realities (such as the issue of nuclear deterrence) be seen in relationship to others and to the fullness of reality, that is God. The moral life is somehow to embody, in transcendental intentionality, a faithful response to God. The response to what is happening in human relations is decisive for the human relationship with God. Ownership of the decision—individual or, or in the case of social ethics, ecclesial, governmental, or societal—is also an (implicit or anonymous) appropriation of the kind of relationship indicated by religious symbols, such as covenant and the reign of God. In this sense, Curran speaks of a transformational model of the relationship between Christ and culture, the authentic moral action and social reality.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 193.

¹⁵⁶ Curran, *Tensions*, 159.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ See Grecco, *A Theology of Compromise*, 55-95.

Religious images of social relationality-responsibility are not absolute norms, but lend themselves to a provisional working out of the content and structure of the set of relationships referred to as the “common good.” Thus, model could serve as a basis for criticizing unjust social structures and relationships or for setting concrete goals for reform. Methodologically, model would then have a predicative function. It would indicate what an authentic moral response might look like and serve “as a source of general, yet distinctive conceptions” of the kind of relationships that should exist among people in society.¹⁶⁰ Curran uses model to stress the developmental and relational aspects of human reality (over the classicist, substantialist construal), from which he infers the impossibility of any single value defining the moral significance of any state of affairs. As a result, every moral value is in relationship to every other, in terms of what ought to happen in a particular historical-cultural matrix (that “time-filled social exchange with God, others, self”),¹⁶¹ in which one’s creative moral response makes one part of “the social dynamics of God’s action on humanity.”¹⁶² Model asks the question whether any proposed action is in harmony with God’s action in the world.

This kind of method presupposes that moral theology has a way of answering that question. In Curran’s theory, the moral reasoning processes that are employed by ethics in general must also be able to perform, or at least support, a theological hermeneutic function that connects human moral response to religious purpose and intention. Curran’s proportionalist argument against the use of nuclear weapons provides a case study on the coherence of theory and practice in dealing concretely with real issues.

Curran spends little time examining the complex historical relationships that are involved in the strategy of nuclear deterrence or the series of chauvinistic or otherwise biased decisions and policies that have led to a militarized situation. To understand such situations theologically requires a hermeneutic for interpreting historical situations (the signs of the time) in the light of faith. For a proportional argument to be credible to a Christian community, it is essential for it to fulfill this expectation. On the basis of the methodological exigences of model, it is legitimate to expect that what is analyzed through general ethical

¹⁶⁰ Geertz, 123; see also 93-95.

¹⁶¹ Grecco, *A Theology of Compromise*, 61.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 64.

categories can be related to the religious images and symbols of dialogue, covenant, and kingdom. Further, the ethical responses taken by the church will be validated in their ability to make it clearer how the church becomes a clearer sacrament of the unity of humankind. Thus, what image of human community and communion with God is embodied in the church, when it endorses a just war solution to a complex situation that is overshadowed by the risks of nuclear weapons?

Curran's response to the issue of deterrence centers on the acceptance of a "practically exceptionless" norm that he believes is grounded in the present historical situation. Such a principle implies that nuclear counterattacks may, in some situations, be justified. Most important, however, it lacks the thick, contextual realism found in the bishops' letter and moves the focus of moral reflection from the life of the church to a rule ethics by which the church and state ought to abide. Indeed, the bishops, whose approach Curran criticizes, initiate a series of questions, which can only be answered in respect to specific, proposed uses of nuclear weapons at the time of decision and which constitutes a negative judgment on nuclear warfare. The bishops attempt "to spell out some of the implications of being a community of Jesus' disciples in a time when our nation is so heavily armed with nuclear weapons and is engaged in a continuing development of new weapons together with strategies for their use," brings attention back to the church as a moral subject, which reflects or obscures its covenant relationship with Christ through its decisions.¹⁶³ The direction they provide is linked clearly to Christian responsibility: "No Christian can carry out orders or policies deliberately aimed at killing non-combatants,"¹⁶⁴ simultaneously serving notice to the state and grounding justification for the Catholic Church, as a national body, to withhold support for any national security measures that are seen as immoral.

Curran's application of the ethical model of relationality-responsibility is isolated from the historical-social reality of culture, of the perceptions and biases, values and disvalues that move groups within society to particular public policy orientations and decisions. In using model as a step toward moral insight, Curran emphasizes a negative function drawn from his rejection of the teleological and deontological models, namely, that no duty or goal is absolutely decisive in formulating a moral response.

¹⁶³ *Challenge of Peace*, n. 157-61; 275.

¹⁶⁴ *Challenge of Peace*, n. 148.

As a result, competing values and disvalues seem to require adjudication through proportionate reasoning, which, in the examples studied, lacks the historical concreteness and the theological interpretation that are imperative components of Curran's theoretical articulation of the meaning and function of model. The point is not to evaluate the ethical value of proportionalism, but to indicate that Curran's recourse to this mode of moral reasoning cannot be the basis of a radical rethinking of warfare in a nuclear world, for the international dialogue that *Gaudium et Spes* desires, or for overcoming the dichotomy of faith and life that Curran abhors.

c. The argument against pacifism: a universalistic approach. In its discussion of deterrence and nuclear war, *The Challenge of Peace* gives a place of privilege and a normative value to the pacifist position, but does not attempt to reconcile the just war and pacifist approaches. Instead, both represent values to be taken into consideration in making concrete judgments about the morality of any particular military decisions or policies. The question, however, remains as to the relative status of both theories within the Roman Catholic community.¹⁶⁵ Curran examines the tension between pacifism and just war theory in light of three characteristics of contemporary moral theology: ethical theory (mediation and grounding of norms), eschatology, and ecclesiology.¹⁶⁶

The argument for pacifism is often advanced on the basis of nonviolence being a gospel value obliging on the whole church, a nonnegotiable demand of discipleship. Curran rejects every ethical approach that takes any part of scripture and applies it directly to life in the contemporary world. Moral norms have to be grounded in critical moral realism that proceeds from the belief that divine realities are mediated in human experience. Along with other revisionists, Curran would prefer "a more relational understanding [of morality] which refuses to absolutize any one value,"¹⁶⁷ but justifies choice in values that emerge in the particularity of a historical situation. One way of finding the right relationship of values is through proportionate reasoning.¹⁶⁸ In this approach pacifism cannot be proposed as a binding value on the

¹⁶⁵ See Daryl Schmidt, "Biblical Hermeneutics on Peacemaking," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* XVI (1986): 47-55; and Joseph E. Capizzi, "On Behalf of the Neighbor: A Rejection of the Complementarity of Just-War Theory and Pacifism," *Studies in Christian Ethics* 14 (2001): 87-108.

¹⁶⁶ Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, 198-224.

¹⁶⁷ Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, 207.

¹⁶⁸ Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, 208.

state or the church. Since the church is no longer in the practice of going to war, the latter statement suggests that the church must support the position, that, as a last resort and to defend its own citizens against unjust aggression, the state may be obligated to have recourse to arms.

Curran also rejects pacifism as universally binding on the basis of his eschatology, which asserts that although redemption has already occurred in Jesus, the fullness of the eschaton will never be totally achieved. Although redeeming love continues to transform present realities, the fullness of transformation will only come at the end of time. Thus, “the Christian believer and the Christian community will always experience the tension between the now and the eschatological future.” This eschatological vision means that Christians must “make a continual effort to change the social, political, and economic structures in which we live,”¹⁶⁹ although the same vision makes it necessary at times to “reluctantly accept or tolerate some nonmoral evils.”¹⁷⁰ Included among these is war.

Curran’s ecclesiological argument rests on the church’s lack of direct knowledge of God’s will and the need to work out its moral response to armed conflict in the eschatological ambivalence--the tension of “already” and “not yet.” In such a situation, the church understands and shapes its relationship to society historically, so that at times the church will oppose what is happening in society; at other times, Christians can and will learn from society. But the goal is the same: “The Christian believer and the believing communities work with all other individuals and groups within society to try to bring about a greater peace and justice in the world.”¹⁷¹ The church finds its place in the world neither in “total opposition” nor in uncritical conformity to the society in which it lives.¹⁷² The church criticizes, proposes positive values, counsels accommodations with imperfect situations, and keeps trying to discover creative ways to transform existing sinful situations. Curran’s argument pivots on the concept of universality--conditioned by eschatological ambivalence and the human limitation of all mediated values. In order to remain open to all who are seeking God and inclusive of divergent moral responses, the church cannot be totally pacifist. Curran’s three-fold response, however, leaves unresolved the dualism between the vocation

¹⁶⁹ Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, 214.

¹⁷⁰ Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, 212.

¹⁷¹ Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, 211.

¹⁷² Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, 214.

of the church as a whole and that of individual Christians and fails to look for common ground shared by both positions.

Curran is unable to bring these views closer together, I believe, because he fails to fully make use of the historical and symbolic potential of model. Since pacifism is associated with the primitive church and just war with the Constantinian period, common ground is not found in the origins of each option, separated as they are by several centuries and inverse cultural circumstances. By attending, instead, to the future dimension of historicity, common ground can be discovered in the task of shaping the common good. This, of course, requires a historically relevant description of the common good, heedful of the partial character of any concretization of the common good, both in relation to the kingdom of God and “the temporal, this-worldly common good.”¹⁷³ If an ethical response is to be accepted as “analogous to the ultimate common good: the union of human beings with God and with one another,” then the moral justification or condemnation of recourse to arms would have to be argued in relation to this good, understood as a complex of goods that “are achieved in communal relationship with other persons, not in isolation.”¹⁷⁴

Curran's non-historical conception of mediation. Curran's use of proportionalism does not relate particular moral decisions to the positive achievement of some at least provisional projection of the common good. Yet, to demonstrate how a particular good relates positively to the dynamic movement toward a still future common good (and eventually the *eschaton*) would seem to be a minimum requirement for Christian ethics. Curran's understanding of how particular choices mediate God's enabling grace in history is primarily conceptual. God's moral will is experienced through human realities understood by human reason. A Scholastic maxim, *ens et bonum convertuntur*, captures the sense in which mediation is understood within the Roman Catholic classicist, natural law world view. Insofar as one could intend or will the good, one could be reasonably sure of participating in God's work in the world. In order to discern the “simply good” in situations, which (because of original sin, human ignorance and sinfulness) are almost always mixed with some evil, reason makes use of principles such as double effect, of proportionate good, or

¹⁷³ David Hollenbach, “The Common Good,” 93.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 87.

commensurate reasoning the good can be identified and, thus, determine the moral intention.¹⁷⁵ This notion of mediation is closer to neo-Scholasticism's construal of natural revelation, with the following changes. Curran views nature in a relational rather than essentialist way and stresses that human beings come to know the good (and God) "in at least three different ways—a discursive deductive way; a connatural way; and a discerning and prudential way."¹⁷⁶ What is similar is the position that what is revealed through human experience is grasped propositionally. Revelation (as consciousness of God's presence and activity in the world) is mediated by rational reflection and verbalized in concepts such as justice or peace. This is a position that does not integrate well with Curran's historicist approach.

Moreover, Curran uses "mediation" in various ways in his writings. Sometimes mediation means finding a non-religious concept that enables the church to dialogue with those outside the Church. Sometimes it means taking a religious image, like the kingdom of God, and finding its equivalent in the social, economic, and political realities of the day.¹⁷⁷ As a result, it is difficult to understand how mediation actually functions in his ethical analyses, although he affirms repeatedly, and somewhat tautologically, that: "Since God is mediated in and through the human, the divine providence and action are known and experienced in and through the human."¹⁷⁸ At times Curran identifies the sacramentality and mediation to "describe the same basic reality."¹⁷⁹ Richard McBrien views the sacramental and mediation principles as two related, yet quite distinct features of the church.¹⁸⁰ Avery Dulles regards mediation as a "corollary of [the principle of] sacramentality."¹⁸¹ For Curran, the premise that "Jesus is the sign of and symbol of God, the church is the sacrament of Jesus, and individual sacraments are truly sacraments of the church," leads to the conclusion that "the acceptance of the sacramental system illustrates the characteristic Catholic insistence on mediation, analogy, and incarnation."¹⁸² However, merely to assert the occurrence of

¹⁷⁵ See Peter Knauer, "The Hermeneutic Function of the Principle of Double effect," in *Readings in Moral Theology, No. 1: Moral Norms and Catholic Tradition*, ed. Charles E. Curran and Richard A. McCormick (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 1-39.

¹⁷⁶ Curran, *Catholic Moral Tradition*, 183.

¹⁷⁷ Curran, *Transition*, 120-23.

¹⁷⁸ Curran, *The Living Tradition*, 4.

¹⁷⁹ Curran, *Catholic Moral Tradition*, 10.

¹⁸⁰ Richard McBrien, *Catholicism*, vol. 2 (Minneapolis: Winston Press, 1980), 1180.

¹⁸¹ Avery Dulles, *The Catholicity of the Church* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 4.

¹⁸² Curran, *The Living Tradition*, 4.

mediation without a critical analysis of what is occurring is to be guilty of what Lonergan describes as “to utter an abstraction,”¹⁸³ that is, to alienate one from experience and, by extension, to undermine the possibility of mediation.

In the end, Curran’s explanation of mediation does not indicate how the theologian, on methodological grounds, arrives at the insight of which human values mediate divine grace. Mediation, instead, performs a negative function; it limits the relevance of universal moral norms and supports a plurality of opinions, that is, a lack of consensus on social ethical responses. Curran’s approach to mediation in these discussions exhibits a clear tendency to arrive at conclusions for human action that connect the gospel and culture by means of principles and values. This assumes that reasonableness is the closest moral theology gets to God’s transcendental and eschatological presence in human history. Because as moral principles recourse to arms and renunciation of force are diametrically opposed, this opposition cannot be overcome on the level of principle.

What Curran’s method requires is a historical model of mediation—a model that moves inductively from reflected experience to moral meaning. Moreover, following Avery Dulles, in order for a Christian inquirer “to be capable of discerning in [historical occurrences] a divinely intended significance,” the concrete events must be perceived symbolically, in “the appropriate response to the events themselves, which by their symbolic power grasp and mold the consciousness of the religiously oriented interpreter.”¹⁸⁴ Mediation so understood requires a mutually interactive relationship between historical knowing and knowledge of salvation history, between moral consciousness and the historical symbols of God’s activity in the world, such as covenant and the reign of God. Lonergan notes that mediation requires complex operations.

But by imagination, language, symbols, we operate in a compound manner; immediately with respect to the image, word, symbol; mediately with respect to what is represented or signified. In this fashion we come to operate not only with respect to the present and the actual but also with respect to the absent, the past, the future, the merely possible or ideal or normative or fantastic.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸³ Bernard Lonergan, *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan*, vol. 5: *Understanding and Being*, 2d. ed., ed. Elizabeth A. Morelli (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 13.

¹⁸⁴ Avery Dulles, *Models of Revelation* (Garden City, N.Y.: Image Books, 1985), 146.

¹⁸⁵ Lonergan, *Method*, 28.

Curran's proportionalist arguments need to be integrated more fully with the historical and cognitional requirements of mediation, if they are to perform the theological task of discerning the divinely intended significance of what the Christian is being called to do. Curran's ethical model of relation-response ought to be capable of bringing together the significance of human experience, symbolic imagination, and historical faith. There is no methodological reason that explains why Curran does not do this.

Curran's view of Catholicism as a "mainline" church. Curran's critique of pacifism reveals an understanding of a church that is closely involved with the political life, structures, and institutions of society. In his opinion, "the whole tradition of the Church's dealing with the issue of peace and war support such an understanding of the Church."¹⁸⁶ The multiple and conflicting demands of both the socio-political reality and its eschatological interpretation explain for Curran why the church can't make an unqualified ethical commitment to the value of pacifism. Although both pacifism and just war theory are acceptable Catholic positions, he not only does not reconcile these two apparently divergent positions, but suggests instead that the just war theory is the more acceptable of the two.

In finding a place for pacifism in the Catholic community, Curran employs an analogy that is both peculiar and condescending. After noting the impossibility of achieving absolute certitude in ethical opinions and extolling the need for acceptance of dissent and disagreement within the Church, Curran observes: "The Catholic Church community has been big enough to include a Francisco Franco and a Julius Nyerere...a Dorothy Day and a Father Coughlin."¹⁸⁷ This unqualified statement seems to overlook the fact that the moral legitimacy of the pacifist position within the church is not a matter of personalities. Certainly there are saints and sinners in the church, but one would expect from ethics a moral argument that shows that the church can distinguish between the two and discern what or who constitute a good or a bad example of what the gospel is all about.

Norbert Rigali observes, "Within relational moral theology [moral judgements] will reflect, at their deepest level, the manifold relations of persons to the reality which encompasses them."¹⁸⁸ Curran's example provides little insight into the experiential understanding of evil (that might justify war or urge

¹⁸⁶ Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, 215.

¹⁸⁷ Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, 215.

¹⁸⁸ Norbert J. Rigali, "Evil and Models of Christian Ethics," *Horizons* 8 (Spring, 1981): 21.

pacifism), especially the cosmic mystery of evil or how a particular choice in the face of evil effects the relationship of the person or social reality “to the Divine Mystery [of God] revealed in the One who was crucified but raised up by God.”¹⁸⁹ Curran is not incorrect when he suggests that the church can never devolve into a totally prophetic function or “find its total identity as a sectarian movement always opposed to and separated from political life and institutions”¹⁹⁰ However, it could be legitimately questioned whether a truly historical approach will recognize that there are times in which the church must give greater emphasis or predominance to its prophetic role or oppositional position, in order to bear witness in faithful discipleship.

It becomes clear from Curran’s aversion for sectarianism that he does not see pacifism as a realistic option for the church but as an abstract ideal (“the pacifist position”) that represents one of the tense poles in the moral dialectic concerning peace and war.¹⁹¹ At bottom, this position reveals a dualism that suggests that the community of Christians must either be a “church” or a “sect.”¹⁹² Relying on a typology taken from Ernst Troeltsch, Curran argues that Roman Catholicism belongs to the “church type” (as opposed to a sect) and required to remain in a partnership, even a tension-filled one, with the state and society.¹⁹³ Thus, the church is open to a broad spectrum of membership, is “less radical and rigorous in its ethic, and does not see itself in total opposition to the world around it.”¹⁹⁴ It follows for Curran “that at times the Church must tolerate the existence of evil while striving to change it.”¹⁹⁵ The church’s role is to meet “the world in a socially responsible way,”¹⁹⁶ not settling issues of social ethics by pronouncements, but participating in a dialogue that contributes to forming the public conscience.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁹⁰ Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, 215.

¹⁹¹ Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, 217.

¹⁹² Charles E. Curran, “Human Dignity and the National Right to Self-Defense. American Catholic Bishops and the Nuclear Question.” *De Dignitate Hominis: Festschrift fuer Carlos-Josaphat Pinto de Oliveira*, ed. Adrian Holdregger, Ruedi Imbach, Raul Suarez de Miguel (Freiburg, Switzerland: Universitaetsverlag, 1987), 577.

¹⁹³ Curran, *The Living Tradition*, 62-65, 172; Curran refers to Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, 2 vols. (New York: Harper, 1960), German original, 1911.

¹⁹⁴ Curran, *Toward an American*, 181.

¹⁹⁵ Curran, “Human Dignity,” 577.

¹⁹⁶ Curran, *American Catholic Social Ethics*, 270.

Curran's insistence on the dichotomy between sect and church ignores the historical changes that have occurred both in society and in the church in the last half-century. He emphasizes that the church must "accept responsibilities for the world in which [it] lives...do what is necessary for the common good...[and work] at transforming the world."¹⁹⁷ He does not, however, address the question of whether or how much the world will allow the church to influence the social structures, ethos, and common meanings that support the status quo or proposed changes. Roger Finke and Rodney Stark approach the question sociologically and offer another view that more accurately reflects the mutuality operative in the church-culture relationship. They acknowledge church and sect as two primary forms of religious organization, but distinguish them on the basis of "the *degree of tension* between religious organizations and their socio-cultural environments."¹⁹⁸ Tensions exist "to the degree that a religious body sustains beliefs and practices at variance with the surrounding environment." Sects represent an extreme case of such tension, the end point on a continuum measuring church-society tension. On the other side of the continuum are "*Churches* [which] are religious bodies in a relatively low state of tension with their environments."¹⁹⁹ From this perspective, church-sect types are relational concepts, subject to change. Finke and Stark note that the process by which sects are transformed into churches is often described as secularization or a process in which a religious group limits its "organizational vigor"²⁰⁰ and loses the tension with its environment that is needed to maintain its distinctive identity and commitment.

Curran's understanding of the sect-church distinction introduces an either-or manner of thinking about morality. It would be more helpful to speak of these types as realized incrementally along a continuum, which—reflective of the prevailing historical cultural and societal realities—allows for many different descriptions of the church and its relationship to society. The image of a continuum would make ethics more attentive and responsive to the fact that the self-understanding of the church in any given time and culture takes on a historical particularity that specifies what it needs to do morally in order to be faithful to the grace of God that enables its existence. That self-consciousness may be more specific and

¹⁹⁷ Curran, *The Living Tradition*, 245.

¹⁹⁸ Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776-1990: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 40.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 40-41.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 237.

less inclusive than is required by Curran's notion of "public church."²⁰¹ By insisting that the Roman Catholic Church in the United States (and by extension in Western society) be "mainline," Curran unnecessarily limits the ability of moral theology and the church to respond prophetically and creatively to critical situations and the worldviews that underpin a public culture.

Implicit in Curran's notion of the church is the fallacy that the church is required to remain a reputable partner in the culture's public dialogue, which unduly limits the church's freedom to oppose culture (e.g. denounce a government policy that commits to military escalation to gain superiority in the arms race). It implies that the church must be ready to tolerate the existence of evil as the cost of such participation. It also makes it more difficult to find a realistic moral measure of evil that facilitates a Christian's or the church's judgment as to when and what evil becomes intolerable.²⁰² The concept of mainstream church (one that must at times tolerate evil to maintain its place in public dialogue), moreover, reveals a Constantinianism that Curran previously eschewed in his discussion of religious freedom. Toleration has the connotation of permitting what one has the power or authority to forbid. The church, in its relationship with the state, is not in a position to control public morality nor should it attempt to do so. Because the modern constitutional state lacks sole responsibility for the common good and is not to be identified with the nation, society or the people as a whole, it would seem (using Curran's already applied views on state and church relations) that the church is not obligated, in making ethical statements about the moral conduct of government, to justify the toleration of evil in the world. The church could as easily acknowledge evil in its institutional and structural manifestations, condemn it, and offer (in terms of the eschatological tensions Curran frequently recalls) the same moral direction and invitation dialogue and growth that putatively sets off a public or mainline church from a sect. To label such a strategy as sectarianism invents a polarity that does not, in fact, exist and to make a value judgment about conflicts between church and culture that overlooks a long-standing Christian tradition of opposition. Moreover, the

²⁰¹ Curran, *The Church and Morality: An Ecumenical and Catholic Approach* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 15-16.

²⁰² Rigali, "Evil and Models of Christian Ethics," 20-21.

impression that Curran gives of sect, as not carrying out full responsibility for society, does not match the real attempts at dialogue that stem from the pacifist religious tradition.²⁰³

Curran's understanding of the church reveals a heavy reliance on pre-Vatican II ideas of both church and state. The just war theory, which was formulated within a worldview of classicism and Christendom, also predates the Enlightenment understanding of state and democracy. The distinction between church and sect that is grounded in the typology Ernst Troeltsch does not take into consideration the changes in self-understanding of Roman Catholicism since Vatican II, especially the significance of the image of a pilgrim Church.

This problem could readily have been avoided by a more judicious attentiveness toward "person"—the third step of Curran's method. In other words, the church and its members, as moral agents and subjects, constitute themselves historically through responses that are appropriate to the faith-based understanding of their relationship to God and others. In coming to discernment about active presence of the Lord in the signs of the time, the church must as assiduously avoid the *a priori* limitations on its freedom that come from sociological typology, as Curran would have it avoid the *a priori* control of absolute, negative moral norms. It is unfortunate that Curran does not follow through with a consistent application the pascal mystery paradigm, which could typify the church's struggle in confronting social evil. War is a situation of extreme un-freedom, in which the community-building or social nature of the human being is frustrated or put on hold until the hoped for (but not certain) stabilization, the tranquility of order necessary for human flourishing, is achieved.

Person and community, human dignity and the common good are correlative. The church is called upon to make choices that constitute it a sacrament of the world. The critical question is not how to avoid appearing sectarian, but what kind of a sign does the church become through its choices around war and peace. "Whether any genuine or profound harmony can be established coercively"²⁰⁴ or how the people of two nations engaged in unleashing unthinkable destruction on each other can find the threads needed to sew

²⁰³ John Howard Yoder, for example, an unequivocal pacifist, considers it an explicit responsibility of the church to enter into dialogue with a non-pacifist state, in order to develop guidelines that restrict the use of war. *When War is Unjust: Being Honest in Just War Thinking* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984), 7.

²⁰⁴ Cahill, *Love Your Enemies*, 5.

together the fabric of a common good or a relationship that resembles the biblical covenant or the kingdom of God is doubtful. On the other hand, peace may not be presented as a naïve utopianism. A guarded realism is necessary if the church is to be a community of ethical discourse, in which creative responses to God are discovered in the complex and contradictory situations of life. Curran notes that the bishops produced *The Challenge of Peace* only after lengthy consultation with the rank and file of the church. Unfortunately, he does not go into the criteria, which guided the process. Instead, Curran's examination of just war theory and pacifism projects the traditional image of moral theology in the role of adjudicator of ethical quandaries. In fact, Curran's approach, which focuses on war as a balancing of goods, rather than a relationship of persons, maintains traditional natural law's subject-object horizon and does not integrate what he describes as the subject pole of the single reality.

f. Reason and revelation: Historical consciousness and salvation history. When Curran argues that pacifism may be acceptable as an individual option, but the just war theory must remain the rule of thumb for the church as a whole in the limited and sinful circumstances of social life, he argues "in the light of the eschatological tension and the signs of the times."²⁰⁵ He also dismisses the use of the Bible as a proximate and binding norm of moral behavior and limits its relevance to contemporary moral discourse by what he frequently calls the hermeneutical problem. Thus, the overarching importance of human reason reflecting on human experience becomes the central mediating value of ethics.

Daryl Schmidt points out the danger of an approach that equivocates rational judgment with mediation: even when a moral vision has been shaped in the light of the gospel, the moral reasoning process is carried on independently of the gospel message.²⁰⁶ One can accept proportionalism, for example, as a credible reasoning process for ordering competing values and conflicting freedoms, which accounts for an eventual choice and its consequences. Such a reasoning process of itself reveals neither a transcendental orientation nor biblical connections. The process of proportional moral reasoning, as well as the issue being considered (such as pacifism or nuclear deterrence), needs to be connected with the biblical or faith vision that is foundational to Curran's understanding of ethics—relationality-responsibility. When biblical and

²⁰⁵ Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, 217.

²⁰⁶ Schmidt, 52.

theological meanings and symbols are invoked on the methodological levels of stance and model, but are replaced by a mixed consequentialism or proportionalism on the level of decision-making, there arises a serious inconsistency that spoils the method. In this case, one is left with a flagrant dichotomy between biblical vision and moral rationality.²⁰⁷ Nevertheless, this is the approach that Curran identifies as consistent with Catholic ethical theory and with the substantive conclusions arrived at about pacifism and just war theory.

One can further explore this dichotomy between reason and revelation in Curran. The eschatology and ecclesiology on which Curran grounds the impossibility of pacifism as an option for the whole Church are not simply theological concretizations of universal human experience. The faith-horizon within which Curran interprets historical reality originates in the historical, religious experience witnessed by the biblical text. Consistency with the methodological exigence of historical consciousness suggests that theological interpretations of historical religious experiences may not de-historicize the “faith mysteries” they purport to interpret.

Curran avoids a critical scrutiny of his interpretation of the bible by reference to what has already been described as the hermeneutical problem. This is problematic for the current discussion, because pacifism and just war theory do not claim the same religious pedigree. If the eschatology of “already but not yet” that appears to assign pacifism to the hoped for future and the just war theory to the realism of the present is rooted in biblical testimony, then it is legitimate to expect the biblical basis for that conclusion to be made clear in the ethical analysis.²⁰⁸ If, on the other hand, the eschatology is a de-historicized theological generalization, then its relevance for interpreting history, as well as its content can be legitimately questioned.²⁰⁹ Schmidt raises this question in regard to the bishops’ letter. It can be asked also of Curran: What interpretative paradigm is being used to understand scripture? According to Schmidt,

the hermeneutic used in the pastoral to interpret scripture is the ‘already but not yet’ of the kingdom in the New Testament, as seen through Augustine’s Neo-Platonic paradigm. While the

²⁰⁷ Rigali, “Evil and Models of Christian Ethics,” 19.

²⁰⁸ See Capizzi, 87-108.

²⁰⁹ See Karl Rahner, “Theologische Prinzipien der Hermeneutik eschatologischer Aussagen,” *Schriften zur Theologie*, Bd. IV (Einsiedeln: Benziger Verlag, 1960), 401-428.

bishops have opened the door to using historical-critical methods, they have applied them within the framework of this paradigm...[making] their own hermeneutic anachronistic.²¹⁰

This anachronism results in ambiguity in the message and moral options about pacifism and just war theory found both the bishops' pastoral and in Curran's commentaries.

It is not my purpose to analyze Curran's scriptural hermeneutic or the paradigm that may underpin his interpretation. It suffices to note that when a methodology proposes to use a faith-based stance, a biblically based ethical model, and an anthropological understanding that uses the paschal mystery as a prototype, it is significant whether an "anachronistic" paradigm and hermeneutics are operative in its moral reflections. If the eschatological situation of moral choice is interpreted independently of "the absolute originary revelation-experience against which all other eschatological statements are derivatives or explanations"; if it by-passes "the word of God that has, in fact, been manifested historically,"²¹¹ then it is a hypothesis about human experience, but is not a mediation of the saving work of God in history.

Moral theology is not itself mediation, in the sense of a salvific event, but is an ordered and disciplined reflection on historical choices and actions that mediate God's intention and activity and an explanation of the "Word" implicit in the event. It must then align the moral realities of which it speaks with the historical realities in order to complete the historical meaning of both. In reducing the role of scripture in moral reflection to one of shaping the Christian vision, moral theology runs the risk of reducing the biblical message to static doctrinal categories or of setting up a process in which the moral reasoning breaks free from the vision and carries on its work without benefit of the "light of the gospel." It would appear that the unwanted dualism between just war theory and pacifism, between mainline church and sect can be traced back to how Curran deals with the "hermeneutical problem" and an uncritical selection of an understanding of scripture that is rooted in a Constantinian-Augustinian world view that anachronistically encapsulates the historical process and message of the scriptures.

These observations point out some of the limits in Curran's methodology and the need to integrate biblical material into moral theology's reflection on contemporary events. The hermeneutical problem is not a sufficient reason for ignoring the narrative testimony of the scriptures, but a reason to be open and

²¹⁰ Schmidt, 51.

²¹¹ Rahner, "Theologische Prinzipien," 403, 407 (my translation).

self-critical about the hermeneutics and the paradigms required for a consistent historically critical approach. Curran employs several biblical paradigms in his moral hermeneutic--creation, paschal mystery, covenant, the reign of God. While such images do “not immediately determine how to respond appropriately to specific situations,” their content and force may not be understood “primarily as abstract propositions.”²¹² Although the problems of biblical hermeneutics may be formidable, the moral theology must still “probe that symbolic world, so that our metaphorical frame lines up with theirs. Otherwise our analogical imagination will operate without the assumptions Jesus had.”²¹³ Moral principles and values that purport to mediate the religious meaning of life to Christians, while at the same time finding common ground with men and women who are, in Rahner’s expression, anonymously responding to God’s offer of grace, become meaningful by being embedded in a stance and horizon that has not lost “touch with its narrative roots.”²¹⁴ Any adequate reflection on the historical character of the Christian ethical response in the present moment is conditioned on the ability of theology to connect this response as event, with the saving intervention of God in history as event. If action on behalf of justice in the world is an integral part of the church’s proclamation of salvation to the world, then Christians must recall that the proclamation of the Good News (as call to and motivation in the contemporary world) has its force precisely as a proclamation of the historical revelation of God in Jesus Christ.

C. Conclusion: A chastened Thomism

“I am a Thomist in the theological sense in thinking that God works in and through the human.”²¹⁵ So Curran, in a few words, explains his commitment to continue to do ethics in the spirit of Aquinas, whose creative fidelity sought to “understand, appropriate, and live the word and work of Jesus in the light of its own historical and cultural circumstances.”²¹⁶ Thomism reflects the philosophical and theological approach to ethics most representative of Roman Catholicism, it still holds out the most promise for dialogue with the world. Curran finds the basis for the durability of Thomistic ethics to lie in its emphasis on human

²¹² Spohn, 120.

²¹³ Ibid., 78.

²¹⁴ Ibid., 65.

²¹⁵ Curran, *The Living Tradition*, 22.

²¹⁶ Curran, *The Living Tradition*, 3.

reason and its affirmation of natural law. It is by virtue of the autonomous exercise of reason, that human beings transcend themselves and, in fact, image God and participate in the divine. Therefore, Curran asserts:

I think the most accurate and succinct statement of Thomistic natural law is this: Human reason directs human beings to their end in accord with their nature. God's plan for the world is mediated in and through the natural law. Human beings alone are responsible for determining how to act in this world, and the norm of their action is based on human reason reflecting on human nature. The responsibility to discover the morally good and to act in accord with the good rests with the human being.²¹⁷

While Curran does not accept Aquinas' cosmological and metaphysical paradigm, it serves for him as a warrant for the humanization and universalizability of morality within a Catholic faith context. "Mediaeval theologians staunchly insisted that faith and reason can never contradict one another. This is a magnificent expression of the goodness and importance of human reason."²¹⁸

Curran describes himself as a chastened Thomist, however, because in his revised approach to that tradition he leaves behind the deductive method, teleological model, and lack of historical consciousness in the work of the Angelic Doctor. In finding alternatives to these limitations, Curran sees himself as chastening this tradition and revising it for service in the church's inquiry into moral meaning and its desire to discern, understand, and do the work of Christ in the world today. Curran's revising project is rooted, as has been already indicated, in moving the touchstone of ethics from human nature (understood as essence) to a human experience (considered as unfolding historically, relationally constituted, and mediated by human meaning). Human reason does not contemplate nature "out there," but becomes conscious of itself, its relationships, operations, and transcendental orientation toward God. Morality is viewed from a theologically informed historical perspective, a subject-based understanding of growth, and a relational model of responsibility.

Although Curran affirms that through reason humans can come to know God's moral wisdom and purpose, historical consciousness and the limitations of autonomous human reason lead him to caution that human judgements are incomplete and fallible. With "the understanding of [morality] squarely and fully in

²¹⁷ Curran, *The Living Tradition*, 185.

²¹⁸ Curran, *Tensions*, 72.

the hands of the human agent,”²¹⁹ Curran’s chastened Thomism is open to diversity of conclusions and ethical pluralism, even within the church. Curran posits the existence of “certain moral values and basic goods that all human beings can know and agree...[although a] general value or principle includes significant differences about its practical meaning.”²²⁰ If human beings, then, have no alternative but to be “the principle of her or his own action through intellect and free will,”²²¹ then in discerning and doing what is good for human flourishing, moral theology must adjudicate the competing values through proportionate reasoning. Even though “One cannot expect the criteria of proportionate reason to do away with all gray areas.”²²² Despite his best efforts to construct a Roman Catholic social ethics, Curran’s “chastened” Thomism tends toward an ahistorical and ideal construal of the relevant factors in moral decision-making.

1. Mediation is treated too conceptually. The pivotal element in Curran’s construal of mediation is human reason.²²³ In practice, however, mediation is reduced to a translation of religious terms to non-religious language and social situations to religious concepts. Curran’s employment of mediation as seen in this and the preceding chapter, focuses more on the mutual exchange of ethical concepts between the church and society-at-large. In Aquinas’ twelfth century universe, the members of society and the church were identical and the realities lived in church and state were united within in a single culture and worldview. Conceptual linking, supported by a culture of faith, could well have been sufficient for mediating the human and the divine. However, in a pluralistic society, in which the church struggles to understand itself and maintain its identity, effective theological mediation requires more.

James Gustafson observes: “The distinctiveness of the Christian experience of the reality of God is that he is experienced with compelling clarity in Jesus and in the Christian story. The confirmation of this (not an uncritical one) in experience grounds Christian morality.”²²⁴ If “Christ is to be found as represented and reflected in created realities, which have their final meaning only in relation to him,”²²⁵ then moral

²¹⁹ Curran, *The Living Tradition*, 186.

²²⁰ Curran, *Moral Theology Today*, 161-62.

²²¹ Curran, *The Living Tradition*, 184.

²²² Curran, *Moral Theology Today*, 158.

²²³ Curran, *The Living Tradition*, 3-6.

²²⁴ James M. Gustafson, *Can Ethics Be Christian?* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1975), 179.

²²⁵ Avery Dulles, *The Catholicity of the Church* (Oxford: Claredon Press, 1985), 67.

theology must not be content with the natural and rational, but through “a conceptual system that would enable theologians to give coherent answers to all the questions they raised.”²²⁶ The identification of the rational with God’s moral purpose in the world is a theological claim that must be verified by relating human strategies, values, or movements back to the Christian story, its symbols, images, and beliefs.

According to Lonergan, the structure of human theological inquiry pushes forward toward a “knowledge of God and of all things as ordered to God, not indeed as God is known immediately (I Cor. 13, 12), nor as he is known mediately through created nature, but as he is known mediately through the whole Christ, Head and members.”²²⁷ Ethical judgments must relate to conversion and the higher viewpoints that evolve from conversion, leading to insight into the mystery of God as the locus of mediation (of the individual, the church, or a social reality) between the human and the divine, religion and culture.²²⁸ Curran’s claims for mediation remain in the realm of what Lonergan calls “common sense,” without passing to the reflective level of transcendence.²²⁹

2. *Limited historical consciousness.* An essential foundational aspect of Curran’s methodology is historical consciousness. However, his treatment of four critical areas in social life today—public morality, genetic experimentation, militarization, and the economy—provides little evidence of the function and effect of the social-historical matrix that specifies and particularizes the relevance of the issue. Religious categories (e.g. incarnation, eschatology, pascal mystery, covenant,) only superficially enter into the inquiry toward moral intelligibility. Likewise, the philosophical notions of growth, change, and transcendence have no dominant or normative role in Curran’s reflections on the particular substantive issues that have been studied in the last two chapters.

²²⁶ Lonergan, *Method*, 179.

²²⁷ Lonergan, *Method*, 135.

²²⁸ See Bernard Lonergan, *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan*, vol. 6: *Philosophical and Theological Papers 1958-1964*, ed. Robert C. Croken, Frederick E. Crowe, Robert M. Doran (Toronto: University of Toronto Press for Lonergan Research Institute of Regis College, 1996), 160-182.

²²⁹ Lonergan, *Method*, 272-3. Lonergan is emphatic about the need to find determinate, Christian content in the values and actions that would convey a consciously Christian moral response to God’s call. He is aware that such determination can lead to misunderstanding of the church by society; he is also aware that what passes as a rational interpretation of human moral experience can be particular and partial, and, as a result, not that easily comparable to the gospel. He says: “As a style of developing intelligence, common sense is common to mankind. But as content, as a determinate understanding of man and his world, common sense is common not to mankind but to the members of each village, so that strangers appear strange and, the more distant their native land, the more strangely they appear to speak and act.”

Historical consciousness (which should include considerations of “social location, diversity, pluralism, and individual vocations”²³⁰ in terms of the multiple temporal and social relationships which determine a “here and now”) takes on other, extrinsic functions in Curran’s reflections: to emphasize the relativity and partiality of all human moral judgements and to distinguish between the classicist worldview and contemporary worldview.²³¹ Curran does not make adequate use of historical consciousness as an approach and hermeneutical tool for understanding human experience, that is, as morally normative and theologically revelatory experience that can unpack the “signs of the time” as calls of God to discipleship and covenant.

In order to understand this loss of historical perspective, one must revisit the stance from which he seeks to interpret moral reality and the role that Scripture plays in his approach. Curran’s “total Christian perspective”²³² reveals a reduction of Christian belief to pithy doctrinal labels separated from the historical and narrative tradition, which is their source. These ahistorical statements can be generalized to every situation and say little more than moral reflection ought not err by moving too far in any one direction. On the positive side, Curran’s articulation of perspective points out the historical limitation of the moral options and norms that are available and the necessity of discovering the moral values inherent in human creativity and responsibility. However, the concepts themselves remain detached from the historical events that reveal them and the historical narratives through which they have informed the church throughout its history. Because the concepts used for moral discernment remain formal and ahistorical, Curran’s analyses lack historical insight.

²³⁰ Curran, *Moral Theology Today*, 112.

²³¹ Curran, *American Catholic Moral Theology*, 45.

²³² Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, 52. Here one finds a description of the Christian beliefs about life that is typical of his writings. “Creation insists on the basic goodness of all that God has made in the world, but creation must be integrated into the fullness of the Christian understanding, which had not been done in the older two-level natural law approach. Sin is present in our world and affects all existing realities, but sin does not completely destroy the goodness of creation; nor is it the last world, for the presence of redeeming love is also active in our world through the work of Jesus and strives to overcome sin. Incarnation recognizes that everything human has been brought into the plan of God and belongs to the reign of God. Redemption points to the fact that redemption has already occurred in Jesus Christ and thus affects not only souls but persons and the world. However, resurrection-destiny has not yet occurred and preserves the tension between the already and the not-yet aspect of the reign of God, recognizing that redeeming love continues to transform the present realities, but the fullness of the transformed reality will only come at the end of time as God’s gracious gift.”

Curran's reluctance to assign any decisive role to the bible in determining norms for Christian morality also impacts negatively on the ability of his method to think historically. Consequently, he limits the bible's usefulness to generalized moral paradigms and virtues. Nevertheless, a theology of revelation, in its historical eventfulness, would seem to be a condition for a mediating Christian ethics to be able to discern of the same process occurring in the lives of people, of the church, and of the world today. If the hermeneutical problem leaves past revelation undecipherable to Curran, on what basis can theology recognize and respond to God's mighty works in history today?

Finally, Curran's use of model to interpret the religious and moral dimensions of the human situation also shares this ahistorical weakness. The biblical images of covenant and discipleship are described in terms of concrete choices that separate, for example, those who "chose life" and those who "chose death," (Deut. 30: 15-20) those who will be a "follower of mine" (Mark 8: 34-38) and those who will "go away" (John 6: 67-70). While the concrete content of those choices differs, even from one biblical book to another, what is worth noting is that the choices are never presented as merely formal. The fundamental option is not separated from the actions in which it is exercised. "Covenant," for example, is a model for the concrete, historically contingent and passing embodiments of what is meant by a faithful relationship between God and humans, among humans, and between humans and their worlds.

In Curran's analyses, this essentially religious model does not bring out the meaning of discipleship and covenant realistically enough. Curran, who often calls for "a more adequate understanding of exactly how the scriptures should be used in moral theology," seems to get locked in the rationality of a chastened Thomism and relegates scripture to that branch of ethics that Thomas treated under the questions on the virtues. For Curran, "the scriptures play a more significant role in the more general aspects of moral theology such as the dispositions of the person and the important values present in social life but a lesser role on particular questions more influenced by changing historical and cultural circumstances."²³³

3. *The need for an ordering principle.* Curran notes that as a result of Vatican II, Catholic teaching accepted pluralism in social ethics. He repeats the theme of *Octogesima Adveniens* that "in the midst of widely

²³³ Curran, *American Catholic Moral Theology*, 10.

varying situations in the areas of social morality...local communities must arrive at their own solutions in the light of the gospel and the social teaching of the church.”²³⁴ The change in venue of moral learning/teaching implies both a change in relations and functions within the church. Herein Curran also finds an alternative to the authoritarianism of the hierarchical teaching office. “Once one realizes the teaching role of the whole church, then the church itself becomes a community of moral discourse, which by definition calls for a public discussion of positions.”²³⁵ Every member of the church has something to contribute.²³⁶ Curran takes for granted that “the church constitutes a community of moral conviction...[that] often shows itself to be the opposite—a community of moral doubt.”²³⁷ It is also a community of moral praxis, of persons committed “to bearing witness to Jesus.”²³⁸ In regard to social ethics, this community of moral discourse is committed to live up to its important role in public life, especially in relation to the “moral life of society and the nation.”²³⁹ From this it follows that the church must facilitate a dialogue among its own and the world that “attempts to discern and live out what is in keeping with its [the church’s] self-understanding and mission” as a community of believers “in which the triune God comes to God’s people, and God’s people respond to God’s gracious gift.”²⁴⁰

The common ground and ordering principle for this dialogue is “catholicity,” meaning universal and all-inclusive. There is an inherent tension in the church as it reaches out to and is inclusive of all, even sinners, among the followers of Jesus. Catholicity also means that the church’s concerns must include all the moral concerns of humankind. It can see, even in movements that clearly want no part of the church, the work of the creator calling for its response. The reality of this inclusiveness, traditionally sought in uniformity and authority, finds support in respect for “the many differences that exist within a general unity.”²⁴¹ Amid diversity and plurality of opinions, the church, by emphasizing complexity (and the difficulty of certain knowledge) and distance from the “core” of faith of many social issues (and so the

²³⁴ Curran, *American Catholic Moral Theology*, 44; Curran is paraphrasing Paul VI, *Octogesima Adveniens*, n. 4.

²³⁵ Curran, *Catholic Moral Tradition*, 216.

²³⁶ Curran, *The Church and Morality*, 63.

²³⁷ Curran, *The Church and Morality*, 9-10.

²³⁸ Curran, *The Church and Morality*, 11.

²³⁹ Curran, *The Church and Morality*, 8.

²⁴⁰ Curran, *The Church and Morality*, 13.

²⁴¹ Curran, *The Church and Morality*, 19.

need for reason and the possibility of error increase), can find room for even contradictory views. While Aquinas could easily concur that no human being is excluded from the human good, the church and morality (particularly the virtues) are construed within a total system, which is presented within “an exhaustive and consistent classificatory scheme.”²⁴²

Curran’s chastened Thomism lacks the ordering teleology of Aquinas. A fundamental question that could guide and adjudicate the moral dialogue for the Angelic Doctor would be: Does something accord with human nature; does it dispose one to one’s supernatural destiny? Curran’s ordering criterion, on the other hand, is apparently catholicity or inclusiveness, the basis of which remains unexplained. Curran appeals to the liturgy, the core of faith, discipleship, and conversion as signs of moral authenticity, but does not integrate them into the process of moral reflection. Although Curran describes the church as a community of believers “in which the triune God comes to God’s people, and God’s people respond to God’s gracious gift,”²⁴³ he does not clarify how this criterion serves to determine catholicity or to order the moral dialogue.

The criterion of catholicity, moreover, largely avoids the context in which the church exists. The process through which the church and theology come to recognize and express the self-consciousness implicit in the notion of “world church” or “sacrament of the world” is not reflected in Curran’s studies, although the relationship itself of church and world is a constitutive part of that dialogue. Curran’s treatment of the specific issues considered in this study does not develop the dialogical meaning of the mutual penetration of church and world—a transformational motif, which requires discussion and demonstration of its relation to catholicity. By leaving the historical concreteness of the church’s relationship with the world out of view, the critical realism required by the relationality-responsibility model cannot be adequately considered nor its normative function included in the moral theological analysis.

²⁴² MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 178.

²⁴³ Charles E. Curran, “The Ecclesial Context of Moral Theology,” *Method and Catholic Moral Theology: The Ongoing Reconstruction*, ed. Todd A. Salzman (Omaha: Creighton University Press, 1999), 127.

As a result, catholicity or universality is moved into a primarily conceptual realm, where the particularity of the Christian experience and the universality of the moral order and of grace are reconciled through attempts to find middle ground solutions. Rather than an ecumenical ethics, understood as an ethics of mutual dialogue between historically specific, ethical and religious approaches and a co-journeying on the path of truth, Curran fosters the discovery of a common ground ethics through an appeal to human experience, which though variously mediated by myriads of meaning still maintains a human generalizability. The alleged ecumenicity of this approach reinforces Curran's original claim regarding the sources of ethical understanding and wisdom that Catholics share with all human beings. However, this notion of catholicity has a strong North American ideological bias. While Curran's desire for ecumenicity "may be admirable...he has yet to explore explicitly the potential inner tensions and ambiguities of the principle when applied to the vast plurality of often clashing, sometimes narrowly exclusive religious [and political] traditions within a global context. Exactly how catholic, we might ask, is the criterion of catholicity?"²⁴⁴

Curran attempts to clarify the practical significance of catholicity as an ordering principle by affirming the Catholic ethical tradition and interpreting it in terms of the sociological description of church (as opposed to sect). This approach to universality, which endeavors to reconcile Catholic faith with the universality of human freedom and responsibility, brings with it the danger that Christianity may be absorbed into the dominant [Western] cultural construal of reality and lose the specificity of its own historically differentiated self-consciousness.

Curran's approach to two concrete human issues--the threat or possibility for life that is posed by war and the threat or possibility for life that issues from the enormous increase in genetic science and biomedical technology--illustrate how catholicity is used as a conceptual tool rather than a historical reality. Curran's reflections reveal a propensity to move quickly to generalizability of principles to give order to the discussion. Although Curran puts these *principles* in a context that is nuanced by the balancing function of stance ("the five-fold Christian mysteries"), the *social and human situation*, characterized by the power

²⁴⁴ Douglas Sturm, review of *The Church and Morality: An ecumenical and Catholic Approach*, Charles E. Curran, *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 31 (1994): 373.

either to irretrievably alter the human constitution or to irreparably destroy both lives and the means of life, is not examined under the same lens of Christian faith. His approach to these particular questions diverges from the structure of his method, whose purpose is to assist in discovering human moral meaning in particular social situations and to connect that meaning to the theological significance of salvation.²⁴⁵

The church, as a human and historical reality, participates along with the state and with society, in the human process of coming to understand human social living and (based on what is learned in that process) to apply its moral wisdom to “those systems and methods, which the various situations of time or place either suggest or require.”²⁴⁶ Developing a moral hermeneutic for this task is essential to its success. Curran’s reliance on generic principles from the Roman Catholic scholastic tradition makes the criterion of catholicity into a conceptual exercise.

Based on ethical model, one would expect that relationality-responsibility would be the best means of interpreting “catholicity.” Serious consideration of the church as moral subject and agent and its self-consciousness in the face of the problems discussed should be essential to defining inclusiveness. Curran’s insistence that “the radicalness of discipleship grounds the reality of Christian growth”²⁴⁷ thrusts the church into a process of trying to make the relationships characteristic of radical discipleship integral to and real in its own life and the social institutions and structures of society. At the same time he warns that theology cannot make demands that are so radical that the church as a whole cannot observe them. In his discussion of just war theory and pacifism, Curran goes so far as to argue: “an ethic of responsibility calls for Christians to accept and aid the role of the state with its use of force.”²⁴⁸ While he praises pacifism for witnessing to the value of peace and recalling the frequent occurrence of the abuses of violence,²⁴⁹ he leaves out of the discussion how the “catholic” community might grow and develop, which the

²⁴⁵ This movement is comparable to the functional specialty of interpretation that brings the principles of hermeneutics to bear on the understanding of historical texts. In Curran, interpretation proposes to lead to an understanding of the moral meaning of social situations in which various and conflicting rights claim legal and social recognition and to offer ways, aligned with Christian conscience, to resolve the conflict and make social progress. See Lonergan, *Method*, 153-173.

²⁴⁶ John XXIII, *Mater et Magistra*, n. 221, *Justice in the Marketplace*, 145.

²⁴⁷ Curran, *The Catholic Moral Tradition*, 91.

²⁴⁸ Curran, *Tensions*, 145.

²⁴⁹ Curran, *Catholic Social Ethics*, 218.

methodological consideration of moral subject and agent is supposed to create. It is not enough to affirm the right of advocates of both positions to be in the church ("catholicity"); Christian ethics must explore the relationship of the mainline church to its pacifist fringe, within a framework of relationality-responsibility.²⁵⁰ Taking catholicity as an ordering principle, without exploring the relations and responses it involves in the light of faith, removes ethics from the social situation of sinfulness and of hope and prevents an incisive, critical reading and interpretation of the signs of the time. Instead, it leaves the meaning of catholicity vague and undefined.

The model of relationality-responsibility, instead of occasioning a full examination of the relationships that are at stake in social, economic, military, and political decisions, shrinks into an examination of the relationship and ordering of values through proportionalist reasoning, based on a vague sense of catholicity/inclusiveness. There is little to be found in Curran's essays of the transcendent reality of the pascal mystery. What emerges instead is a series of lectures on the historical meaning of several social principles, values, and virtues that have been part of the Catholic moral theological tradition over the centuries. The framework of the questions remains within the limits of Curran's chastened Thomism.

In order to "penetrate and understand the social and theological universe within which the church is presently situated...[Christian ethics] must gain insight into the frameworks which form the

²⁵⁰ If one changes the topic from war to racial discrimination during the civil rights movement in the United States, one sees more clearly that the problem is not resolved simply by identifying the level of radicalness the church or its members are willing to embrace. If Christian ethics can show that not every believer falls short of his or her duty, who cannot join demonstrators in Selma or Montgomery or who does not want to go along with general boycotts, this does not mean there is such a thing as a "just-discrimination" theory, as was advanced by many white churches in both North and South. When one shifts the venue of the question away from moral obligation to one of a relationship of the church with the state, and society the options also change. For example, even though it might not be universally obliging on every Christian to put his or her life in danger by joining a protest march, one could conclude that it would be immoral for the church to denounce the civil rights movement or to ask blacks to postpone their civil rights claims in the name of peace. The church might also experience itself as called to support the social movements that seek equality of human treatment for blacks.

In the same way, when the venue of the question of war is shifted to that of the relationship of the Christian community to those, for example, who will be killed by the military force unleashed in war, one cannot simply revert to a just war position, even if this costs the church its "mainstream" position. Curran's conviction that the pascal mystery provides the appropriate paradigm for the painful choices that are necessary in order to be the church of disciples must play a greater role, along with the relationality-responsibility factor, discovering the moral meaning that is present in historically emergent situations. The reality of relationality-responsibility and the paradigm of the pascal mystery urge Christians to more creative alternatives than either just war or pacifism.

contemporary questions.”²⁵¹ This involves a recognition of the role of civil or general society in defining the common good and the relation of “the meanings and commitments which bind people together” to developing an appropriate language for public discourse in the discovery and commitment to moral goals.²⁵² The task of establishing and verifying authentic catholicity recognizes, moreover, that public moral discourse is filled with opinions, some of which are false. As Lonergan says: “There are true and there are false value-judgments.”²⁵³ Common sense and the religious and social institutions that are constituted by shared meanings may embody general bias, inauthentic decision-making, and failures and decline of the social process. The dialectic process needed to evaluate the experiencing, understanding, judging, and deciding that are (even on a preconscious level) constitutive of human society building is not completed by an *a priori* avowal of the church’s openness. “Catholicity” must have a dialectic acuity that can capture the dynamic structure of social reality.²⁵⁴

This admittedly lengthy analysis of Curran’s discussions of substantive social issues is an attempt to analyze why, when applied to concrete situations, his methodology does not sufficiently support the requirements of dialogue or of relating contingent moral action to the religious reality described as “Christ transforming culture.” Curran’s chastened Thomism leads him away from the concrete, the immediate, and the world as it is.²⁵⁵ That world, in Lonergan’s understanding, is a dynamic structure, the result of deliberation, evaluation, decision, and responsible action. It is an emergent world, the outcome of freedom and creativity of human subjects that can be understood, criticized and also changed by human subjects. It is many worlds of many meanings.²⁵⁶ New meanings have to be integrated into in “the patterns of living, the institutions, the common meanings of one place and time”²⁵⁷ that differentiate them from the classicist world of Aquinas. A shift from Thomism to a chastened Thomism requires experiments in meaning that begin with experience and reflect an empirical approach that changes both our understanding of what is known, as well as our understanding of understanding itself. In order to move the Thomistic ethical insights

²⁵¹ Hooper, *Ethics of Discourse*, 192.

²⁵² *Ibid.*, 218-19.

²⁵³ Lonergan, *Method*, 233.

²⁵⁴ Lonergan, *Insight*, 234-35.

²⁵⁵ See Lonergan, *Insight*, 422.

²⁵⁶ See Lonergan, *Third Collection*, 169-183.

²⁵⁷ Lonergan, “Transition from a Classicist World View,” 129.

into a post-modern world, one must pass through a series of plateaus that integrate new understandings, judgments, evaluations, and desires into a new historical social reality. Lonergan images this process as the attainment of a higher viewpoint, in which not just ethics, but the very notion of ethics is radically transformed. Curran's translation of Thomistic concepts indeed reflects the language and consciousness of contemporary thinking. While Curran no longer seeks the certainty of universal truth, however, he seems content with conceptual generalizability and universality, preferring "abstract universality...to the manifold details and nuances of the concrete."²⁵⁸ Curran wants to maintain not an abstract and ahistorical universality and unity, but a universality and unity that recognize historically emergent particularity and diversity.²⁵⁹ In practice, however, Curran's revised Thomism seems to reflect only a partial metamorphosis. His reliance on the concepts and principles of Thomism and their strongly rational construal underpin an ethical approach that reflects on historical consciousness that is more involved in reflecting on historical consciousness than using it.

²⁵⁸ Ibid., 178.

²⁵⁹ Curran, "Ecclesial Context," 142-149.

CHAPTER SEVEN

EXPANDING THE DIALOGUE

Perhaps the most significant characteristic of the entire work of Vatican II was the emphasis on dialogue. Dialogue also adequately describes what is occurring in contemporary Catholic moral theology, above all an ecumenical dialogue with other Christians.¹

This study has been about method and change in Roman Catholic moral theology, specifically the changes required in the wake and spirit of Vatican II and the contribution that Charles E. Curran's experiment in method has made to this transformation. In moving from the classicist worldview and its understanding of natural law ethics, Curran endeavors to develop a methodology that integrates critical elements of the contemporary worldview and facilitate dialogue with modern culture. The critical analysis in the previous chapters of this study suggests that Curran's approach does not measure up to the demands of dialogue, neither those emanating from the Second Vatican Council nor those that arise from the inner structure of his proposed methodology.

That this should be so is not surprising, because the process of renewal in the Roman Catholic Church, particularly its attempts at dialogue with the world, encountered unforeseen difficulties, not least of which was an underestimation of the enormity of the task. The first part of this chapter will review the church's goals for dialogue, its experience in trying to implement dialogue, and the adjustments that need to be made in the light of that experience. These adjustments spotlight the need for a more historically conscious understanding of the human, social reality of dialogue in reference to the participants in dialogue and the social structure of knowledge and values. I suggest that by continuing to develop his approach along the lines of Lonergan's theory of *cosmopolis* and emergent probability, Curran can expand the role of historical consciousness in his approach. Moreover, historical consciousness must assist the church in coming to know itself in history and as a part of history, so that it can appropriate its eternal destiny through its temporal commitments. A clearer connection between history and eschatology requires a better

¹ Curran, *Toward an American*, 15.

hermeneutic of history, in order for the church to fulfill its mandate to be “sacrament of the world.”

Rahner’s eschatology and its impact on the church’s historical self-consciousness is offered as a means of correcting some of the misleading notions in Curran’s work and of expanding the insights of Curran’s approach.

The Second Vatican Council’s imperative of *aggiornamento* represents a new sensitivity to the nature and mission of the church. Dialogue with the world affirms the church’s worldliness: a consciousness of itself as a historical, human community of faith, responding to God’s grace in history and responsible (with the rest of humanity) for the future of the world. *Aggiornamento* expresses a dynamic understanding of church and world as continually emergent, historical realities. In dialogue the church evangelizes the world in an effort to share the faith that brings humanity into its full, transcendental relationship with the triune God. In dialogue the church wrestles with the significance of its faith in terms of its own human nature. It comes to a fuller understanding and appropriation of grace as human experience. Dialogue integrates the church into historical human experience and the social interconnectedness of all human reality. Dialogue also provides the social-historical matrix in which the church experiences, reasons, judges, and responds to God in a process through which it affirms its identity and creates its future.

The inner structure of Curran’s method assumes that knowledge is both historical and manifested through shared meanings. It attempts to appropriate the complexity of human experience and its emergent or historical dimension. Although Curran grounds his approach in Lonergan’s theory of cognitive structure, his ethical analysis does not take into account what Lonergan says about cognitional differentiations (the development of knowledge and understanding) to explain the social and historical characteristics of knowledge.² From the recognition of multiple cognitive horizons and stages of understanding arises the necessity of dialectics and dialogue for navigating different ethical commitments and finding agreement within a plurality of meanings. This operation of method is also required in order to acknowledge and integrate the social bonds of understanding and the self-identity that mark the church. Since shared knowledge and values lead to a pattern of social interrelations that anchors moral meaning, it is essential

² See Lonergan, *Insight*, 476-84; *Method*, 302-12.

for social ethics to appreciate and respond to the complexity of dialogue signified by cognitive differentiation.

Moral experience is a social and historical occurrence that precedes ethical and theological reflection. Moral theology, in order to capture what is going on, must take into account every aspect of religious and moral experience and help it find expression in dialogue.³ Despite his proposal to the contrary, Curran does not explore the meaning of human experience as a genuine moral experience and source of moral wisdom. This is also true of Curran's approach to the moral wisdom of the church. His largely conceptual approach opts for a clarification of traditional Roman Catholic values and principles, pointing out the historical limitations and evolution of their meaning. However, he does not adequately portray the actual status of the church in the world today. As a result, the church's position in the dialogue with the world is misconstrued. The church, in dialogue with the world, enters into an on-going process of conversion, in which its own intellectual, moral, and religious consciousness changes and develops. Freedom and creativity are integral to dialogue and the church dialogues not simply through conversation but through transformative action. Lonergan's theory of cognitive differentiation would be helpful in clarifying how dialogue leads to "a free and responsible act, a very open-eyed act in which we...settle what we are to become."⁴

The freedom of the church and of moral theology to be counter-cultural to any significant extent is curtailed by the overly conceptual approach that Curran follows. The empirical social reality of religion and the church should enter into the theological understanding of the church. In the dialectic relationship that shapes social meaning social reality cannot be replaced by ideas, because, in Lonergan's expression, "the primordial basis of [human] community is not the discovery of an idea but a spontaneous intersubjectivity."⁵

When Curran undertook his theological project, there were few precedents for what had to be done. He creatively built on the metaphysical and epistemological originality of Bernard Lonergan's

³ See James M. Gustafson, *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective*, vol. 1: *Theology and Ethics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 115-29.

⁴ Bernard Lonergan, *A Third Collection*, ed. Frederick E. Crowe (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), 173.

⁵ Lonergan, *Insight*, 237.

rethinking of Catholic Scholastic philosophy and on the transcendental theology of Karl Rahner, with its confidence in the universality of God's grace in the world. The resultant approach is an ethics of responsibility that articulates and reflects the existential and transcendental aspects of human decision-making and its consequences, as envisioned and understood by Lonergan and Rahner.⁶ A moral theology that is grounded in the conviction of God's revealing and enabling grace at work in a universal manner in the world and of morality as a response to that grace needs to elaborate as fully as possible an explanation of the moral normativeness of human experience. That normativeness, which presupposes the reality of God's revelation or self-communication, must be related to the identity and mission of the church. Thus, moral theology requires a methodological step that connects human experience to the religious mystery, which is the origin and goal of moral action.

In theory, Curran views the structure of the moral life as dialogical. Therefore, the systematic, critical, theological reflection in the moral life must be structured dialogically, both in the sense of being in dialogue with others and of exercising a critical analysis and judgement of the positions and counterpositions that constitute the substance of that conversation. A positive way to approach this task starts with the understanding of the church embodied in the call for dialogue with the modern world.

A. The difficulty of moral dialogue

Although embraced with much enthusiasm in the early 1960s, the demands of dialogue proved to be more difficult for the church than first imagined. The cause lies primarily in the complexity of moral meanings and values, which, in dialogue about human social living, are encountered as social and historical realities, as persons and communities, rather than as ideas and ideals. Although John XXIII first spoke of opening the church to the world, it was Paul VI, who advanced dialogue as the theme of his papacy and the

⁶ Curran most often associates the expression "ethics of responsibility" with the thinking of H. Richard Niebuhr and attributes to Bernard Haering the establishment of responsibility as an ethical model for Catholic moralists. His use of the concept, however, primarily resembles the metaphysical and ethical views of Bernard Lonergan and the theological existentialism of Karl Rahner, rather than the approaches of Niebuhr and Haering.

hallmark of the relation of the church with the world.⁷ The pope wished “to demonstrate with increasing clarity how vital it is for the world, and how greatly desired by the Catholic Church, that the two should meet together, and get to know and love one another.”⁸ Dialogue intended to deepen the church’s self-awareness, correct the flaws that obscure the visible manifestation of what the church is called to be, and establish an appropriate relationship with the world in which the church exists.⁹ Despite the difficulty of establishing successful dialogue with the world, the pope insists on the need for the church to establish relations “with the surrounding world in which it lives and works.”¹⁰

In dialogue, the church “must first identify with those to whom we would bring the Christian message” and then listen closely to the yearnings implicit in human experience.¹¹ Dialogue can begin in conversation about human society, human morality and values, human rights and duties with urgent social concerns. “Religious liberty, brotherhood, education, culture, social welfare, and civic order” and above all “the cause of peace” are topics that hold out promise of becoming common concerns and uncovering common values.¹² Dialogue is an expression of the church’s rootedness in the world and of God’s saving action in Jesus. Paul VI envisions dialogue as the church imitating Christ, who approaches humankind and overcomes the distance that has grown between God and the world. Dialogue moves from God to the world and is motivated by the:

internal drive of charity which seeks expression in the external gift of charity... The Church must enter into dialogue with the world in which it lives. It has something to say, a message to give, a communication to make... [which is hierarchically discerned, authoritatively proclaimed] and set forth and interpreted by the church in its prudent legislation.¹³

⁷ Paul VI, *Ecclesiam Suam*, 1964 August 6 (downloaded 2001 December 5, from the Vatican Website: www.vatican.va).

⁸ Ibid., n. 3.

⁹ Ibid., n. 14.

¹⁰ Ibid., n. 12.

¹¹ Ibid., n. 87.

¹² Ibid., nn. 106, 108.

¹³ Ibid., nn. 64-65, n. 51.

Dialogue has the religious intent of moving humankind and the church closer to that divine dialogue that has its origins in the Trinity and is manifested to humanity through creation, revelation, and especially the incarnation of the Son.¹⁴

The church is human and, therefore, a church of sinners. Many of the problems that the church wishes to dialogue about are found in the church. This constitutes an “extremely acute”¹⁵ problem for dialogue. However, the pope appeals to the theory of Christ’s mystical body and affirms a “higher status” for the church, grounded in its supernatural life, divine adoption, and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. The pope thus claims for the church perfection not possible on the level of mere humanity.¹⁶ This introduces a dualism between the world and the church that shades the meaning of dialogue.

Dialogue is supposed to hold up a mirror to the church, so that it can see itself and understand the relationship between the church and the world, as “demanded by the dynamic course of action which is changing the face of modern society...by the pluralism of society, and by the maturity man has reached in this day and age.”¹⁷ Although Paul VI conveys an overriding sense that the church no longer wants to be isolated “from secular society” and needs to reconnect and even identify with humanity,¹⁸ some difficulties for dialogue are already apparent. His model, the dialogue between God and the world, implies that the church already knows what it wants to tell the world and does not provide space for dealing with the church’s sinfulness.

Dialogue is a key theme in the council documents and a constitutive event of the council itself.¹⁹ There is a significant shift away from *Ecclesiam Suam*’s image of the church as mystical body of Christ (and of God approaching the world in the church) to images more reflective of the church’s worldliness (and of the world coming to God in the church). Because the substance and goal of a dialogue is ecumenical, the council describes the church-world relationship in terms of human strivings and of

¹⁴ Ibid., n. 70.

¹⁵ Ibid., n. 42.

¹⁶ Ibid., n. 39.

¹⁷ Ibid., n. 78.

¹⁸ Ibid., n. 87.

¹⁹ Hanspeter Heinz, “Kirche im Dialog—Dialog in der Kirche: Zur Aktualitaet der Enzyklika Paulus VI. ‘Ecclesiam Tuam’,” *Dialog Statt Dialogverweigerung: Impulse fuer eine zukunftsfaehige Kirche*, ed. Annette Schavan (Kevelaer: Butzon und Bercker, 1994): 79-89, 80.

discovering God's saving acts in the signs of the time.²⁰ This underscores the church's "mission to enlighten the whole world with the message of the Gospel and gather together in one Spirit all men of every nation, race and culture."²¹

The commitment to the world, the responsibility to call others together in moral searching, and the confidence in God's promise to all humankind become the means for the church to carry out its mission in the world and to accept "the law of our earthly temporal pilgrim status."²² Karl Lehmann, however, describes the disappointing unfolding of this hope.²³

The church as a whole lacked the readiness for the skills and endurance dialogue requires and, in the years following the council, dialogue fell on hard times. Lehmann points to a naiveté on the part of the church, which underestimated several important factors, among them: the strong allure that the ethos of modern society, the gulf that exists between the Gospel and modern culture, the degree of secularization and erosion of religion in society. As well, society has not stood still since the council. Significant political, social, economic, and cultural changes have brought with them contradictory claims and demands, divergent values and views that leave the individual unconnected and society fragmented. The purpose of dialogue, in Western society at least, takes on the specificity of redeeming "the human as subject"²⁴ through rebuilding and maintaining the bonds that are essential for authentic human community and the functioning of the democratic state.

In consenting to a dialectical process with modern thought and with civil society, the church cannot insist on any special status, such as, for example, the *communio* that embraces many different communities and cultures, the sacrament that can symbolize and communicate the humankind what all creation desires.²⁵ The church will also have to resist its tendency toward an authoritative and official institutionalizing of the process. The German bishops link the external function of moral discourse to the internal dialogue of the church. All members of the church have the opportunity to find their voice in

²⁰ See Pesch, 50-72.

²¹ *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 92, *Vatican II*, 999.

²² *Ibid.*, 6.

²³ Karl Lehmann, *Vom Dialog als Form der Kommunikation und Wahrheitsfindung in der Kirche* (Bonn: Sekretariat der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz, 1994) www.dbk.de. downloaded January 12, 2002.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 12.

coming to decisions affecting the Christian life, for the church's voice will no longer be primarily or exclusively that of the hierarchical office holders. Both in and out of the church, dialogue requires a desire to understand the other and to conscientiously commit to bring together, analyze, weigh different ideas and interests, and "to let the visionary power of the Christian proclamation impact on this world."²⁶

The historical division that the church is attempting to overcome might be described as "fortress church" versus "modern liberalism." In the wake of the Enlightenment, the church had withdrawn into a religious fortress that defended religion by blocking out the ideas of modernity and ignoring the evolution of modern science. On the other hand, liberal ideas of society, politics, and philosophy were aimed at excluding religion, the church, and theology from society's attempts to find a rational foundation for a universal order. As the modern period continued to ignore and privatize religion, the Roman Catholic Church continued to formulate its teachings and consolidate its authority and structures in a manner that excluded input from the secular world.

Both the rational universalism of the Enlightenment and the authoritarian catholicity of the Church began to crumble on their own, especially in the years following the First World War, when the political map of Europe was re-drawn.²⁷ In the rubble, new identities of the church and of society were emerging, along with the need for historically knowing both social realities. Curran's method reflects the council's aspirations and attempts to deconstruct the assumptions and conclusions of an older methodology that would work as barriers to authentic exchange. In order to expand the dialogue, however, and to make it more effective, Curran's work needs to expand its historical consciousness from historical deconstruction of past teachings, to historical knowing of present social, moral experience.

B. Lonergan: *Cosmopolis* and human experience

For Curran human experience replaces nature as the basis for natural law reflection and morality. Curran takes this insight as a way to overcome the dichotomies of salvation history and profane history, human nature and grace, the natural and the supernatural, faith and reason, and the church and the world.

²⁶ Ibid., 14.

²⁷ Hans Kueng, *Third Millennium*, 197-99.

This affirms for him the possibility that a revised natural law ethics can find common ground with humanism and that an authentic humanism can serve as a critical partner in a dialogue with Catholic moral theology. However, although his methodology attempts to make explicit the heuristic structure through which the Christian finds moral meaning in human living, its primary model is that of the individual conscience.

Bernard Lonergan offers a heuristic, which he terms "*cosmopolis*," for acquiring knowledge of social reality specifically as a historical, changing, dialectical, and moral occurrence of human intersubjectivity.²⁸ Unlike the ideal state in a classicist approach, *cosmopolis* stands for the unknown-to-be-known; "it is a withdrawal from practicality to save practicality. It is a dimension of consciousness, a heightened grasp of historical origins, a discovery of historical possibilities."²⁹ Lonergan regards *cosmopolis* as a methodological tool for determining the social structure of common sense and shared values, for understanding the process of social decline and progress, and for discovering ways to overcome decline and work effectively for social justice and a truly human society. This viewpoint facilitates dialectic and dialogue between conscious subjects, their milieu and environment, cultures, institutions, and eventually, the religious realities of human striving.

Curran's important contributions to historical knowing are oriented more toward the past (history as a discipline), deconstructing barriers to dialogue, rather than facilitating dialogue with human experience itself (knowledge as historical). The enduring achievement of his work on method will undoubtedly be recognized in his historically conscious, negative critique of an older Roman Catholic moral theology. Curran's work is pre-dialogical, concerned with articulating the directions that theology must follow, in order to enter into a credible and effective moral dialogue with the modern Catholic as well as with the modern world. Curran's work serves a primarily pastoral purpose of changing attitudes within the church. Despite the achievement of this purpose, Curran's approach, as ethical method, does not reach the potential that Lonergan's thought might have offered it.

²⁸ See Lonergan, *Insight*, 232-69.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 266.

In relating Curran's thinking to an operative construal of human experience, it should be noted that Lonergan uses the word "experience" to denote the initial level of consciousness and his transcendental precept calls for attentiveness to what is going on both sensorily and within human consciousness.³⁰ On this level, data are gathered that will eventually contribute to intelligent inquiry and to the third level of consciousness where critical reflection moves toward a judgment of what is known. Human experience as a source of ethical wisdom corresponds more closely to this third level of consciousness that calls for a judgment that "this is so" and which, when made, completes the dynamic process of the operations involved in the unrestricted desire to know. This desire is not abstract, but aims at action. In order to grasp the social meaning and moral normativeness of human experience, Curran's method needs to be more sensitive to the narrative or dramatic character of human living. A methodological procedure, a heuristic such as *cosmopolis* is able to supply the rigor and consistency required of a historically conscious social ethics.

The church's commitment to discern the signs of the times in the light of both the gospel and human experience attributes an irrefutable normative value to human experience. In order for the normative force of experience to be critically integrated by Catholic moral theology, experience cannot be treated by moral theology as "raw data" to be ethically evaluated, but as human and moral meaning making and valuing. Human experience, moreover, is what goes on in a community of shared meanings and values, which is not only the object of social ethics, but, epistemologically, points to an essential condition of historically valid understanding and communication. Therefore, the intelligibility of human living is connected to discovering the "developing whole that is present in the parts, articulating under each new set of circumstances the values it prizes and the goals it pursues, and thereby achieving its own individuality and distinctness." In order to carry on the dialogue required to appropriate moral understanding and to find common ground among Christians and other men and women in the world, the moral theologian needs not only to affirm that God extends God's grace and truth to all human beings, he or she must employ a methodology that has "the capacity to reveal the direction and momentum of life."³¹

³⁰ Ibid., 168.

³¹ Lonergan, *Method*, 211.

The signs of the times may also be “genuine signs of the presence and purpose of God,”³² but only when interpreted using both the faith that trusts that:

the Spirit of God...fills the whole world” and human experience, “because with man—each man without exception whatever—Christ is in a way united, even when man is unaware of it. Christ, who died and was raised up for all, provides man...with the light and strength to measure up to his supreme calling.”³³

Christian and non-Christian have something to learn from one another about the purpose and presence of God in human life. Toward that end, human experience must be understood as having a co-normative value, along with Christian revelation, for moral discernment. James Gustafson describes discernment as an “ongoing process of discovery” of the normative value of the human as such.³⁴ Richard McCormick holds that the human is to be taken as “the human person integrally and adequately considered.”³⁵ The specific role of theological reflection involves not only the dialogue with human experience, but relating this experience to the pascal mystery, in which “the key, the centre and the purpose of the whole of man’s history is to be found.”³⁶ Out of this desire and need for dialogue and communitarian action comes the need for an ethical method that can credibly discern and account for the transcendental thrust of human meaning and value.

Human experience (thus an understanding of the truly human and of the common good) occurs within social-historical matrices of human intersubjectivity. Every function of meaning (cognitive, efficient, constitutive, and communicative) has a social dimension.³⁷ Common meanings constitute communities and the lives of the individuals in those communities. They presuppose common experiences, common and complementary ways of understanding, common judgments, consensus, and commitments.³⁸ This kind of community

³² *Gaudium Et Spes*, n. 11, *Vatican II*, 912)

³³ John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*, n. 14, *Justice in the Market Place: Collected Statements of the Vatican and the U.S. Catholic Bishops on Economic Policy, 1891-1984*, ed David M. Byers (Washington, D.C.: NCCB and USCC, 1985), 282.

³⁴ James M. Gustafson, *Theology and Christian Ethics* (Philadelphia: United Church Press, 1974), 243.

³⁵ Richard A. McCormick, *Health and Medicine in the Catholic Tradition: Tradition in Transition* (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 15. McCormick is following the definition of Louis Janssens.

³⁶ *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 10, *Vatican II*, 911.

³⁷ Lonergan, *Method*, 78.

³⁸ Lonergan, “Transiton from a Classicist World View,” 128.

is the possibility, the source, the ground of common meaning; and it is this common meaning that is the form and act that finds expression in family, polity, in the legal and economic system, in customary morals and educational arrangements, in language and literature, art and religion, philosophy, science, and the writing of history.³⁹

All of these institutions change, but “all such change is in its essence a change of meaning.”⁴⁰ Lonergan conceives all common sense has a collaborative character that creates meaning and originates value.

Although Lonergan’s theory lacks context, it insists that invariable structure, transcendental intentionality, and unrestricted openness of inquiry only occur in the concrete. Unlike Curran, who stresses the formality of the structures of his practical methodology, Lonergan stresses the practical function of formal reasoning. Part of this process is creating ethical symbols that concretize the transcendental openness and desire of human consciousness and allow for the realm of freedom and creativity: the future dimension of our seeking “an integration of the human good on the level of historical consciousness.”⁴¹

The approach given in *cosmopolis* can also overcome the split between change of heart and change of structures that proves so bothersome to Curran. “Because the subject is one of the objects [in this perspective], there can occur the transformation of the conception of the object [society, social institutions, etc.] only on the condition that there occurs radical conversion, a real development, in the subject.”⁴²

Cumulative development and decline has both subject and object poles.

But the shape and form of human knowledge, work, social organization, cultural achievement, communication, community, personal development, are involved in meaning. Meaning has its invariant structures and elements but the contents in the structures are subject to cumulative development and cumulative decline.⁴³

“Thus, as Lonergan indicated in his discussion of values, the human struggle for authenticity is very much conditioned by the state of progress or decline that presently exists.”⁴⁴ The importance of treating ideas in an ethical dialogue as more than ideas could serve as a corollary of this insight.

³⁹ Lonergan, *Collection*, 254-5.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Bernard Lonergan, *Collected Works 10: Topics in Education*, ed. Robert M. Doran and Frederick E. Crowe (Toronto: University of Toronto Press for Lonergan Research Institute of Regis College, 1993), 78.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Lonergan, *Method*, 81.

⁴⁴ Ann Marie Dalton, *A Theology for the Earth: The Contributions of Thomas Berry and Bernard Lonergan* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1999), 154.

Moral judgements and values that are proposed as normative reflect and express a community of meanings that have emerged historically not only out of a particular philosophic horizon, but from a community's common experience, understanding, and choice of values. Moreover, in contemporary society there are many such communities. For social ethics to deal with ideas in ethical dialogue only as ideas is to risk getting lost in the shrapnel of philosophical, ethical, and cultural fragments described by Alasdair MacIntyre.⁴⁵ A Catholic moral theology that wants to learn from and inform human experience requires the methodological capacity and systemization to discuss contrary and complementary positions in terms of their content and dynamic structure, their community of meaning and the biases that limit them as authentic human experience.

The notion of good is not abstract, but inextricably connected with historical human living. Thus, the good of order (such as the family, the state, institutions) is an actual system or a scheme of recurrences that orders the manifold of human desires and the efforts required to meet them. The ordering is dynamic, for the system itself is active. It is driven by the emergent movement of reality, discovered by questioning, and constructed by creative intelligence out of the many possible systems that could be chosen. Social ethics deals primarily with the good of order, which is linked downwards to the multiple manifestations of individual desires and aversions and upwards to a third kind of good (the good of value, including the religious good) that emerges only through reflection and judgment, deliberation and choice. Knowledge and action are thus linked through willing or the exercise of the "spiritual appetite."⁴⁶

Lonergan proposes an intrinsic ethics, whose obliging power arises in the internal exigence for the self-consistency of knowing and doing. In this approach, value does not function as an external prescription, ideal, or principle, but as the concrete possibility of the emergence of a reality that embodies the required self-consistency between knowledge and action. In the process of willing, however, people can make an effort to avoid authenticity through refusing self-consciousness, choosing rationalization, or succumbing to moral renunciation.⁴⁷ Because of the propensity of human beings toward self-deception, rationalization, and moral resignation, values may be false and close one to "our effective orientation in the

⁴⁵ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 1-5.

⁴⁶ Lonergan, *Insight*, 621.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 621-22.

universe”⁴⁸ or contribute negatively to the social process.⁴⁹ To be able to discern the normative function of human experience, moral theology must provide an effective ethical critique of that experience. In order to distinguish authenticity from inauthenticity, moral enlightenment from delusion, point out flights from interiority, and uncover the conditions of progress, ethics enters into a dialogue with experience that is shaped by the requirements of critical, dialectical analysis. This process begins with society as it is and the concrete actions through which human beings establish objects of desire, intelligible orders, and schemes of recurrences.⁵⁰

The concept of “emergent probability” provides Lonergan with a way of explaining the process of social construction and human development, the dynamic process of human social reality and the dialectic by which social structures and relationships come into being and change. Although human beings are social by nature (as stated by Aristotelian-Thomistic thought), “community itself is not a necessity of nature but an achievement of man.”⁵¹ If the good of order is understood as a set of interrelated schemes of meaning and value, then that good can also be considered as “potential,” “becoming,” or “actual.” Our social environment and its habitual character are emergent. The natural law that allows for a degree of intelligibility and predictability to human events, nevertheless, does not account for freedom and choice in the construction of social reality. The probability of a particular social constellation occurring and enduring for any length of time depends on the human “exercise of the transcendental operations of knowing and meaning-making.”⁵² Moreover, emergent probability is propelled by the relatedness of human purposes to absolute finality, the unconditioned good, and ends that become the source of progress to greater understanding and freedom.⁵³

A society or culture is progressive, when there is a “high probability of such schemes [a set the conditions for attaining more complex knowledge and responsible action] emerging and surviving.”⁵⁴

Decline refers to conditions, recurrent schemes and their rationalizations, that mitigate against authentic

⁴⁸ Ibid., 624.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 625.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 624-26.

⁵¹ Bernard Lonergan, *A Third Collection*, 170.

⁵² Dalton, 147.

⁵³ Lonergan, *Insight*, 488-504.

⁵⁴ Dalton, 148.

living by persons and communities, “where authenticity is understood as a number of conversions [intellectual, moral, and religious].”⁵⁵ Decline involves the exclusion of comprehensive insights, the isolation of culture from social reality, and the suppression of the unlimited desire for knowledge and value into a fatalistic acceptance of “things as they are”, undermining any “critical basis for culture.”⁵⁶ In applying this analysis to social ethics, it becomes clear that one of the central tasks of the ethicist is to try to regain a critical basis as condition for positive social change.⁵⁷ Because the normativeness of human experience is intrinsically bound to the authenticity of human knowing, this critical task also fulfills a condition for the integration of humane experience, required by any moral theology that is intent on interpreting the signs of the times.

Social morality occurs in the dialectical process of choice and the pattern of concrete behaviour. This process is dialectical, in that it passes through common sense to judgment to responsibility in a movement toward “the supreme value [which] is love of God and [in which] all other values are seen as expressions of God’s love in the world.”⁵⁸ Social situations or proposals cannot be evaluated on the basis of perspective or principles alone, much less by a calculus of benefits, based on the conceptual content of values. To arrive at a moral understanding of society and its institutions, “we have to study their history. For it is in history that man’s making of man occurs, that it progresses and regresses, that through such changes there may be discerned a certain unity in an otherwise disconcerting multiplicity.”⁵⁹

Since Curran’s commitment to the methodological revision of Catholic moral theology finds its fundamental orientation and philosophical underpinnings in Lonergan’s transcendental study of understanding, it is consistent with Curran’s project to develop his exercise of historical consciousness along these lines, in order to develop a more effective capacity for dialogue. An ethical dialogue with “human experience” engages real human beings and communities, along with their

common field of experience, a common mode of understanding, a common measure of judgment, and a common consent ... [for] it is this common meaning that is the form and act that finds expression in family and polity, in the legal and economic system, in customary morals and

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 149-50.

⁵⁷ Lonergan, *Insight*, 255-56.

⁵⁸ Dalton, 152.

⁵⁹ Lonergan, *A Third Collection*, 171.

educational arrangements, in language and literature, art and religion, philosophy, science, and the writing of history.⁶⁰

Dialogue pays attention to “the operative meanings constitutive of our social arrangements and cultural intercourse.”⁶¹

Christian social ethics must not be content to address only problems and issues facing society; it must be concerned with the broader process of social and cultural decline and progress, which impact on the emergent probability of individual and community self-transcendence and intellectual, moral, and religious conversion. The issue of truth is at the heart of both quandary questions and those of praxis. Shared truth-finding and cooperative work between church and world imply moral theology’s responsibility to meet the exigence of uncovering the positive aspects of human development in the experiences of the persons and communities with whom the church dialogues. In inquiring about common meanings and values, their internal relations, congruencies, and differences, moral theology helps make sense out of human experience and suggests common ground that makes theological mediation possible. By bringing to consciousness the appropriation of or flight from the normative operations of knowing, Christian ethics contributes to objectifying and reflecting on the authenticity of the judgments and proposals that arise in social living and dialogue. At the same time, a critically realistic ethics understands and judges the real to be the provisional result of a movement toward or away from absolute transcendence. It also regards the Christian community of meaning and value as subject to the same propensity to decline or progress and having the same need for conversion as “human experience.” In contrast to Curran’s practicality and reserve in terms of what is possible and required of the Christian,⁶² Lonergan proposes an imaginative and motivating model (*cosmopolis*) for making judgments of what can and ought to be done. What Curran describes as the cosmic dimension of sin, Lonergan considers biased human judgments, which are pessimistic about progress and introduce a “critical incapacity” to truly discern the potential for change that exists in the concrete situation.⁶³

⁶⁰ Ibid., 170.

⁶¹ Ibid., 179.

⁶² Curran, *Ongoing Revision*, 294.

⁶³ See Dalton, 161; Lonergan, *Insight*, 256.

Historical knowing is a dialectical process in which positions and counterpositions are formulated, developed and rebutted, as limited, concrete propositions about changing social arrangements.⁶⁴ Historical conversion involves “moving from one set of roots to another.”⁶⁵ An ethics of human experience begins with the mediated world of meaning, “a world not known by the sense experience of an individual but by the external and internal experience of a cultural community, and by the continuously checked and rechecked judgments of the community.”⁶⁶ For example, moral reflection on economic development will begin with an exploration of the meanings that underpin in people’s minds some particular economic policy and then move to a critical reflection on values that support or challenge it. Ethical reflection that is grounded in the human experience of a particular recurrent scheme of values and choices, of the intellectual constructs that interpret them, and of the structures and institutions that embody them can dialogue equally with Christians themselves, as with those who do not share in the church community. Curran’s economic analyses do not examine the cultural assumptions that limit ethical choices and “lead to economistic and technological conception of justice and democracy.”⁶⁷ As a result, his arguments, which pivot on concepts of justice, equality, and participation (detached from their thirteenth century meaning system) derive their meaning not so much from a Christian vision of the world as from a critically unacknowledged and unexamined source.

A check on this kind of error could be effectively put in place by adding a systematic step of theological verification to ethical method. An ethical-theological method ought to “yield commutative and progressive results”⁶⁸ that connect human choices and states of affairs with the mystery, from which the human, unrestricted, detached, and disinterested desire to know originates.⁶⁹ The “content of [the human being’s] systematic insights, the direction of his judgments, the dynamism of the decisions can [then] be embodied in images that release feeling and emotion and flow spontaneously into deeds no less than

⁶⁴ Lonergan, *Insight*, 413.

⁶⁵ Lonergan, *Method*, 271.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 238.

⁶⁷ See Kroeker, 114.

⁶⁸ Lonergan, *Method*, 20.

⁶⁹ Lonergan, *Insight*, 569-72.

words.”⁷⁰ Beyond critical inquiry and description, moral theology, in order to complete the hermeneutical circle of inquiry, must explain what it has come to know, in terms of the mystery toward which human living tends and for which the Son of God redeemed it. Christian ethics is accountable to its community and thus must relate its ethical judgments and conclusions to the symbols, images, and narratives that are constitutive of that community of meaning. It must do this in a way that does not confuse mystery with myth, and that provides, as Geertz describes it, “the moods and motivations”⁷¹ that lead to the will, the willingness, and the willing of religious responsibility. Thus, Christian ethics helps recover what is authentically human and thematizes it an authentically Christian way.

Curran’s position that there is no distinctively “Christian ethics” cannot obscure the requirement of historical consciousness that Christian ethics not get subsumed into the more general category of human ethics. Historically conscious Christian ethics regards the human as “the authentic horizon within which Christian doctrines [e.g. Curran’s five-fold mysteries] are to be apprehended and an understanding of their content sought.” Finally, ethical reflection “moves to a creative exploration” of communication and communicative action.⁷² Human experience, to be legitimately seen as a medium of God’s grace and redemptive activity, must be taken and understood on its own terms. Lonergan’s thought provides a method for validating human experience, evaluating it, and bringing it “full circle” into a Christian understanding of the moral life—individual and social—that can integrate it thematically into Christian living. Within this circle of truth-finding and valuing dialogue emerges. In Lonergan’s words:

beyond dialectic there is dialogue. Dialectic describes concrete process in which intelligence and obtuseness, reasonableness and silliness, responsibility and sin, love and hatred commingle and conflict... it can be more helpful, especially when oppositions are less radical, for the investigators to move beyond dialectic to dialogue, to transpose issues from a conflict of statements to an encounter of persons... While the dialectic of history coldly relates our conflicts, dialogue adds the principles that prompts us to cure them, the natural right that is the innermost core of our being.⁷³

The meanings and values that comprise human experience are made explicit in their diversity by dialectic. The purpose of this is not to distil the various meanings into a compromise of common elements,

⁷⁰ Ibid., 570.

⁷¹ Geertz, 96-98.

⁷² Lonergan, *Method*, 136.

⁷³ Lonergan, *A Third Collection*, 182.

but to facilitate a dialogue that can result in a new and shared recognition, a higher synthesis, of the moral bond of community than can exist among human beings and human societies and is consistent with the transcendental nature of human knowing and divine grace. Human experience becomes a normative dimension of moral and religious conscience, when it is held up for scrutiny in the light of the call of divine love. Avery Dulles captures the intellectual process of coming to know the movement of conversion and transcendence in moral action.

Dialectic seeks to identify the fundamental conflicts between diverse interpretations, past and present. Then, by reference to certain critical standards (such as Lonergan's own preferred standard of conversion to the transcendent), the dialectician seeks to bring to light the positive values (which Lonergan calls "positions") and the disvalues (which he calls "counterpositions") in the mutually opposed theories. Dialectic thus points the way to a new proposal that can "sublate" the previous theories.⁷⁴

In Curran's methodology, it is the function of model (relationality-responsibility) to expose and interpret the dialogical character of morality and social-historical matrix of moral choice. When Curran applies that methodology to concrete questions of social ethics, however, the anticipated considerations of relationality-responsibility are merely referred to or remain unexamined. Curran's essays on specific areas of ethical concern do not exemplify the dialogical structure of morality or ethical reflection. In Lonergan one finds a theory and method for interpreting human, social experience and a means of moving from dialectic into dialogue about the ethical imperatives that are constitutive of authentic experience. He does this not only in a manner that can respect and guide the intellectual conversion that is the aim of dialogue, but its moral and religious purposes as well. It is an enormous project that will take ethical reflection through a complicated web of relationships, meaning- and value-systems. It points as well to a new way of doing ethics—in a dialogue, involving many voices—that makes the single expert (even single experts in discussion and debate with each other) obsolete.

C. Rahner: History, eschatology, and historical consciousness

Lisa Sowle Cahill describes Curran's endeavour to renew theology in the Roman Catholic Church as an attempt to help the church look at itself and to undertake the structural and theological changes

⁷⁴ Dulles, *Revelation*, 127.

necessary to more accurately reflect the understanding and identity that was embraced by the Vatican Council II.⁷⁵ Within the framework of Curran's methodology, such an undertaking implies a historical and morally responsible knowledge of the church. One comes to know the church in its decisions and actions, as a morally responsible agent and a subject, which (to repeat Lonergan) settles what it will become. The church is plural in the sense that many different worldviews, value systems, and theologies (formal and informal) are at work in it. It is a pilgrim church insofar as the world exists in the church, not as an unfortunate imperfection, but as an enduring quality of its human, creaturely existence.⁷⁶ The church, thus, is a big word; it can refer to local parish, the North American church, the church in non-Christian cultures, or the universal church. This church can only be known and understood in its existential reality historically.

In theory Curran affirms all these things. In practice, the subjectivity of the church, its actuality as a community of faith, as sacrament of the world is not part of his ethical studies of substantive, social issues. What methodologically ought to be an indispensable consideration in Curran's third step, anthropology, does not appear or functions only as a criterion for inclusiveness or "catholicity," dissent and diversity of ethical opinions. The closest Curran comes to portraying the church in a historical, existential way is when he describes it as a community of moral discourse. Within this community more than one understanding of the social problem and of the appropriate Christian solution will often be found, neither of which "is permitted to identify the authority of the church exclusively with [its] own opinion."⁷⁷ Curran's vision of the church as a community of moral discourse, however, requires a model of the church that is significantly different from the authoritarian centralizing structure of modernity and from the sociological typologies current at the turn of the last century.

Historical mindedness of the church as a community of moral discourse and as an agent and subject of moral responses in the world requires that moral theology appropriate an understanding of history characteristic of Christian consciousness, that is, an eschatological consciousness. The significance of one's understanding of eschatology exercises a determinant impact on how one does ethics and how one

⁷⁵ Cahill, "Review Symposium," 344.

⁷⁶ Karl Rahner, "Von Dialog in der Kirche," *Schriften zur Theologie*, Bd. VIII (Einsiedeln: Benziger Verlag, 1967), 428-29.

⁷⁷ *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 44, *Vatican II*, 944.

views the relationality-responsibility of the church, because eschatology impacts on how one views and values our historical, temporal givenness.⁷⁸ Curran's social ethics narrows his historical perspective, in that the historical, social reality of the church and its moral and religious consciousness has no significant role in his social-ethical reflections. The question, "What kind of church do we become when we take this or that decision?" does not form an integral part of his analyses. Even the notion of church as "a community of moral discourse" lacks the intrinsic cohering and ordering principle that can distinguish it from other organizations. Karl Rahner combines eschatology, ecclesiology, and moral responsibility in a way that can be effective in moving Curran's approach to a more historically conscious understanding of social reality, including that of the church as a community of moral discourse.

From Rahner's eschatology one could argue toward a "eschatological principle" as the basis of ordering and, when necessary, adjudicating the divisions and dissents that occur within the community of moral discourse. The eschatological principle relates to the material content of ethics, the process of conversion, and the church's conscious orientation to the kingdom of God as a symbol of its calling and a heuristic for moral inquiry. Without a more explicit theological determination, Curran's understanding of the principle of catholicity has a merely temporal and spatial connotation that is detached from the church's eschatological reality and its rootedness in the saving event of Christ's death and resurrection.

Rahner situates his understanding of the *parousia* within a phenomenological reflection on what he speaks of as the "absolute future."⁷⁹ The absolute future is a dimension of the experience of each person and humankind as a whole as a known-unknown. It is the consciousness that beyond the future that we plan, project, and over which we have disposal (the future that we create), is a future that comes to us, is beyond our control, and cannot be projected. It is incomprehensible, unsurpassable, and limitless; an occurrence in which the human being falls silent and truth speaks.

⁷⁸ For example, Stanley Hauerwas details his methodological differences with James Gustafson with reference to their differences in their understanding of time and history. Stanley Hauerwas, "God as Participant: Time and History in the Work of James Gustafson," *Wilderness Wanderings: Probing Twentieth-Century Theology and Philosophy* (Boulder, Co.: Westview Press, 1997), 62-81.

⁷⁹ Karl Rahner, "Marxistische Utopie und Christliche Zukunft der Menschen," *Schriften der Theologie*, Bd. VI (Einsiedeln: Benziger Verlag, 1965), 77-88.

Human beings are always projecting themselves into the future. We must ask whether this future, metaphysically, is an extension of the present, which still remains encompassed by an unknown and incomprehensible emptiness or whether this future is a hint of the absolute future, which can't be planned, but can only be accepted. In the first case the future is an object, not essentially different from other objects. In the second case, the future is the horizon of all human knowledge, action, and hope. As such, it is always present as the possibility of the absolute fullness of being. Christians affirm the second possibility. In this case, according to Rahner, the absolute future becomes "event" (*Ereignis*) in which a person orients oneself to God. The absolute future is intrinsic to one's present choices and actions. By entrusting oneself to the mystery of God, Christians understand the world not as an indefinite extension of the present, but as the proclamation of an unlimited freedom. History and human life are understood as self-transcendent becoming toward a unmediated union with God. The dynamic reality of this future is an intrinsic dimension of human consciousness and motivation (therefore the absolute future is not extrinsic, "out there"). For Rahner, the ethical import of this is that the consciousness of the absolute future grounds the absolute value of every individual and reveals the theological principle for the ordering of society: that the love of God and love of neighbor are inseparable.

A phenomenology of the future, as such, corresponds to Christian beliefs, but gives no certainties about the future. Rahner then moves to history and theology. To speak of an encounter with the absolute future would have no specific meaning for Christians and certainly not the meaning of the absolute future coming into the present and becoming an event in our lives, without the historical incarnation of the divine Word in Jesus Christ. In Jesus the self-communication of God is visible in history as the absolute future of the world and that future is salvation, irreversibly given, experienced, and believed in the categorical experience of human living. Without the historical appearance of the Word of God and the historical witness of the word of God (scripture), hope would be groundless. It follows, that for Rahner knowing oneself in relation to the Lord and to the scriptures is a necessary experiential dimension of moral decision-making for the church and the Christian.

The absolute future becomes the *parousia*, the completion of temporal history in God and which began in the irrevocable completion of salvation history in Jesus, the central meaning and transcendental

fulfillment of humankind.⁸⁰ These realities, the former still outstanding and the latter already fulfilled, mutually influence each other, while forming a tensive unity, which gives the church its specific eschatological character. Thus the church is on pilgrimage toward the absolute future, always transforming itself in light of the kingdom, which transformation is the result and responsibility of human intelligence and choice, in obedience to the word of God. The word of God has a double meaning in Rahner's thought: Jesus himself and the written scriptures.⁸¹ The *parousia*, as the coming again of the crucified and resurrected Lord, means that God's total offer of God's self to humankind is already unsurpassable (nothing can be added to it) because God's self-communication has been totally accepted by Jesus. As the absolute future of human beings, the *parousia* not only relativizes all things temporal, but validates them as that which mediates God's ultimate victory over sin and corruptibility. Thus, eschatology as a moral principle brings the limited present and the absolute future together in a process of discernment by the community, in which their experience of faith in Jesus unfolds. The scriptures are critical to this process because they mediate "the absolute originary revelation-experience against which all other eschatological statements are derivatives and interpretations."⁸² Thus, Rahner understands the church as inseparable from Christ. The church is the community of those who consciously and willingly participate in faith, hope, and love in the eschatological, definitive and essentially unsurpassable bestowal of grace on humanity through the self-communication of God to humankind accepted in Jesus Christ. The essence of the moral question, then, and the ordering principle for catholicity is how does a particular choice and action, taken in the power of the future already fulfilled in Christ, bring the kingdom of God closer to humankind?

This eschatological perception of the church can contribute to and further Curran's experiment in method. Bringing the future into more explicit consciousness as a dimension of historical consciousness draws attention to the dynamic process of the church transforming itself in accord with its eschatological character. In this way, Curran's approach can more effectively affirm in practice the anthropological dimensions of moral reality that it identifies as a critical requirement of ethical reflection. The uncertainty

⁸⁰ See Karl Rahner, "Kirche und Parusie," *Schriften zur Theologie*, Bd. VI (Einsiedeln: Benziger Verlag, 1965), 348-67.

⁸¹ Rahner, "Theologische Prinzipien," 401-28.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 403. (my translation)

of history and the limitlessness of the absolute future provide the conditions of freedom and creativity that lead, through the commitment to the ideal, to a new, but as yet unknown reality. Christian ethics, when it arrives at particular conclusions or recommendations, must relate this response to the character of the community of faith that appropriates the decision and to the kind of witness that emanates to the world from that choice.

In its core, the moral question is an ecclesial one: what does it mean to be “the church” in the world today and how does the church understand its mission in the world. The historical consciousness of becoming influences how one construes the church’s relationship to the world. Curran’s eschatology cautions moral theology not to identify the kingdom of God as a concrete ethical norm for social action. This is in line with Rahner’s thinking that the world can never become the church, nor can the church ever become the kingdom of God. However, Curran’s analyses do not move from this eschatological insight to the reality of how the fullness of the future is now present in the church in Jesus Christ, of how the church becomes the sacrament of the world, of the absolute future wherein the meaning of the “truly human” can be discerned. Within an ethical model of relationality-responsibility, such as Curran expounds, how one interprets “sacrament of the world” also implies the relationship that will function normatively in discerning the response the church will make in the midst of particular and complex social problems.

The notion of mainline church, which Curran evokes, is a sociological type and describes religious groups with a relative stability of structure, doctrine, birth-based membership, attitudes and practices that reflect a more compromising stance toward the dominant culture where they exist.⁸³ “Churches” are religious communities that are aligned with the established and official culture of a particular nation or country. Mainline churches also tend to fit in with the predominant ethos of their environs and too easily and uncritically reflect the prejudices and biases of society at large. Curran’s conception of the church as “mainstream” and “catholic” (small “c”) implies certain presuppositions about its relationship to the world and society. That these assumptions also include a normative factor is evident in his discussion of the just war theory, where he states that the church as a whole cannot be pacifist, citing the difference between a

⁸³ Laurence Iannaccone, “Why Strict Churches Are Strong,” in *Religion: North American Style*, 3d. ed. Thomas E. Dowdy and Patrick H. McNamara (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 57.

church and sect as justifying factor. Curran's question measures the fulfillment of the church's mission by reference to the temporal, limiting, foreseeable factors necessary to maintain ongoing communication with the world. Rahner suggests that theology seek this measure in the absolute, unrestricted, and incomprehensible freedom and creativity bestowed on the church by Christ.

Working with a theological image of the church as sacrament of the world, Rahner affirms that the church must be visibly, tangibly present in the world and society.⁸⁴ Society, however, is not a monolithic reality, the "secular," as it were, opposed to the "religious." It is pluralistic, in that it lacks a basic stock of shared convictions, necessary for a unified moral purpose and essential for giving some amount of content to the meaning of the common good or common ground ethics. The church's mission and message in the world will no longer be favored and supported, although the public may be polite and the state may still pay some kind of homage to religion. In such a situation, which Rahner describes as that of the *diaspora* church, Christians cannot depend on partnership with the world as a standard of sound ethical thinking. Civil society provides no model or ideal for the church to follow, for "the formal rules of the game of democracy are not sufficient by themselves to make it possible for all to live together in freedom and peace."⁸⁵ In this sense, Curran's optimism in the democratic system and the conviction of his revised natural law approach appear theoretical, lacking in the historical knowledge the church needs to determine its own future. Christianity has no fixed ideal of a temporal utopian state of affairs to strive for. But Christianity is positively oriented toward any meaningful human future plans, as a God-given task to participate in human liberation and progress and the opening of human beings to the fullness of their humanity. Indeed, the absolute destiny of every person is the basis, according to Rahner, of each one's

⁸⁴ Rahner, "Die Zukunft der Kirche und die Kirche der Zukunft," *Schriften zur Theologie*, Bd. XIV (Einsiedeln: Benziger Verlag, 1980), 320. It is worth noting that Rahner's conception of anonymous Christianity is not simply an expression of the transcendental nature of the human being, but is inseparably tied to the historical revelation-event in Jesus' death and resurrection. The universality of grace takes nothing away from the unrepeatable uniqueness of the church or in any way makes the church superfluous. The saving meaning that can be found in human experience cannot be separated or even known apart from the historical occurrence of Jesus. See Karl Rahner, "Die Anonymen Christen," *Schriften zur Theologie*, Bd. VI (Einsiedeln: Benziger Verlag, 1965), 545-54.

⁸⁵ Rahner, "Der Christ in seiner Umwelt," 94 (my translation).

value. Rahner's eschatological view is not a flight into mystery or an outlook too vague to apply to ethical reasoning.⁸⁶

Faith, not as doctrine, but as a commitment of the person to the eschatological promise made and accepted in Jesus, is the basis for the church's dialogue with the world, along with its commitment "to bear witness to all that the ultimate meaning of life is not an empty absurdity...but the absolute future who is God."⁸⁷ Rahner bases his hope for successful dialogue and a positive relationship between the church and world, not on the basis of shared rationality, but on the possibility of shared compassion. "The giving of realistic help, in which love of neighbour must be made real, is to a large extent a matter which calls for human experience, one in which collaboration between individuals [or groups] who interpret human life in the most diverse ways, is both possible and necessary."⁸⁸ The structure of planning for the temporal future is a project of the present, yet open to more than what is being planned. The individual's or society's attitude toward the future, however, may refuse that openness. When the church becomes involved with the process of shaping the human future it is guided by imperfect images of the kingdom of God, which "in their irremovable duality, positive and negative, constitute the necessary mediation and historical form for that active and passive openness through which, by which, and in which human beings open themselves absolutely to the absolute future."⁸⁹ As a pilgrim and *diaspora* church, Christians are in a position to challenge the common sense understanding of reality, to oppose ideologies that would limit the future only to what is foreseeable and plannable, and to take on a prophetic position that, far from negative, is facilitative of viable solutions for unjust and intolerable human situations. Christian utopias or visions of the future social relations help concretize the content of the often amorphously defined, opportunistically pursued, and oppositionally particularized "common good," without closing down the avenues of hope. The pursuit of utopias takes courage and creative imagination for they are not only legitimate concretizations of hope, but "they are the destiny which God's providence intended for man, in carrying out and suffering of

⁸⁶ James M. Gustafson, *Ethics From a Theocentric Perspective*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 37.

⁸⁷ Rahner, "Der Christ in seiner Umwelt," 97 (my translation).

⁸⁸ Rahner, "The Church's Commission to Bring Salvation to the World and the Humanization of the World," *Theological Investigations*, vol. 14, tr. David Bourke (New York: Seabury, 1976), 311.

⁸⁹ Rahner, "Experiment Mensch," 280 (my translation).

which alone one can genuinely and fully live out one's Christian existence today."⁹⁰ The church, as the eschatological community of salvation, enters into dialogue about the future not limited by the facticity of what exists and what is foreseeable, but also conscious that every human construction is thrown into question by the real object of human hope. "Only on this condition can Christianity say to the man of today that this future, too, under the sign of creatureliness, of sin, of law, of death, of fruitlessness, and of redemption holds true through Christ and that this future, too, is redeemed and sanctified and brought to its full meaning, because it is already overtaken by the oncoming future of Christ and by the divine self-communication...and therefore this future has taken place in the *kairos* of Christ."⁹¹ Rahner argues that the eschatological perspective, no matter how vague it may seem to some, is central to any Christian appraisal of the world, judgement of any social situation, and integral to any responsible decision to act in for the good of humankind and human society. The needs of the human future go beyond our ability to plan and, therefore, social ethics needs to be challenged to see beyond the foreseeable and risk truly creative and free decisions.

Rahner's eschatological ecclesiology legitimates and calls for a more prophetic character in Catholic social ethics. Because faith in the absolute future does not specify what social structures or institutions are normative or supply concrete material norms for ethical decision-making, the ultimate choice is given over to human responsibility. If the kingdom of God is not a blueprint for moral social behavior, neither is natural law's ideal society, the Enlightenment's civil society, or evolutionary or technologically constructed utopias. The promise of the resurrection, however, reminds the Christian that somehow (which Christian faith cannot describe) material, created reality takes part in the completion of history, the *parousia*. Images of the kingdom of God and the new heaven and earth, which assert that the world in its unity as matter and spirit will be brought to perfection, only make sense analogously. In ethical choices Christians move back and forth from particular, historical experience to transcendental consciousness of God, as the absolute future. Christians grasp the meaning of this ambivalence partially through the biblical narrative and the moral precepts found in both testaments, which contain concrete

⁹⁰ Rahner, "Kirche und Parusie Christi," 366 (my translation).

⁹¹ Ibid., 366-67.

material demands that concern the historical and social tasks that express the transcendence of human living together.⁹²

The need for the faith community to carry out moral discernment in dialogue lies, for Rahner, in the fact that the task is simply too large for any one person or system to even describe and the need to break open the worldviews and value systems that encapsulate moral thinking in an inner-worldly myopia.⁹³ Dialogue is more than laying all the relevant facts on the table, facts that can only be assembled by bringing together the experiences of many. Dialogue is not a process that will rescue the church from the diversity and pluralism that exists within it or will set down unified requirements for the whole church. Rahner regards dialogue as a process that awakens and mobilizes the faith consciousness of the church. It is nurtured and nourished by the scriptures, in a process in which Christians help each other to integrate faith and daily living in society. This community of moral discourse uses the scriptures to better understand their social experience and, where possible, to come to some common agreement and engage in some common action that is truly an act of the church, of the people of God.⁹⁴ Even, where agreement can't be reached, the challenge is not that of tolerating one another, but of allowing faith to question believers about what they see and about letting experience question faith about what it proclaims.

For the Christian, human experience is always more than immediate. It is movement into the future, an expression of the human freedom and of fidelity to the presence of Christ's freedom in history in the church.⁹⁵ The moral reasoning of proportionalism, with its focus on moral and pre-moral goods, seems inadequate to capture this eschatological-transcendental dimension of moral discernment or match the demands of dialogue. The problem of ethical choice is not one in which all created goods are merely relative and the Christian must accept the results of human rationality simply as qualitatively and quantitatively less than the absolute good (which in Curran's terminology is called "resurrection destiny").

⁹² Karl Rahner, "Die Einheit von Geist und Materie im Christlichen Glaubensverstaendnis," *Schriften zur Theologie*, Bd. VI (Einsiedeln: Benziger Verlag, 1965), 193-94.

⁹³ Rahner, "Von Dialog in der Kirche," 426-44.

⁹⁴ See Stanley Hauerwas, *In Good Company: The Church as Polis* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 143-149. Hauerwas offers a positive evaluation of John Paul II's encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*, which sees the attainment of freedom as a pilgrimage toward maturity of truth and draws direction from the Bible.

⁹⁵ Rahner, "Zukunft der Kirche," 326.

Not only can the meaning of the good never be totally thought through and clarified by human reason, but moral theology, according to Rahner, must account for the ontological difference between human deeds and what the presence and action of God in the world embodies. It is not the good we do that is analogous to what God is and does. It is the human, historical, relational, moral consciousness of God as the absolute reconciliation of all creation that is the enabling condition, which makes possible all moral knowledge of particular choices.⁹⁶

D. Conclusion: Expanding the dialogue

Since the Second Vatican Council, the word dialogue has taken on a religious meaning. Dialogue goes beyond the meaning of social communication and commerce. It reflects a specific historical situation in which the church seeks to discern the signs of the time and through them to respond to God, as a sacrament of all humankind.⁹⁷ That this dialogue has turned out to be more complex and more difficult than first anticipated is not, in hindsight, surprising. The sheer enormity of differing worldviews, the diversity of moralities, and the range of intellectual pluralism result in such variations about the meaning of life, that it seems nearly impossible to enter into dialogue, much less to arrive at any agreements. The demands of dialogue are simply too overwhelming to be carried successfully by any single person or even a discipline, such as moral theology. If Curran's work falls short of successfully accomplishing the goals which the church envisioned for dialogue forty years ago, his attempts, on the positive side, have indicated ways in which the dialogue can and must be expanded.

If the people, nations, religions, and cultures of the world do not share a worldview or hold to a common value system, dialogue might seek its basis first of all in the cognitional structure that is common to all human beings. With this insight gleaned from the philosophical research of Bernard Lonergan, Charles Curran moved forward to develop a methodology that could serve as a basis for ecumenical, ethical dialogue. Perhaps Curran's greatest contribution to the development of the discipline of moral theology in the Roman Catholic tradition lies in his insistence on historical consciousness as a constitutive part of the

⁹⁶ Karl Rahner, *Hoerer des Wortes: Zur Grundlegung einer Religionsphilosophie*, ed. J-B Metz (Munich: Koesel-Verlag, 1963), 63-70.

⁹⁷ Rahner, "Von Dialog in der Kirche," 426.

construction of a new approach. His conviction that shared moral norms can be discovered in an inductive process, focused on particular issues and mediated by intelligent human experience redefines Catholic moral theology and becomes a point of no return for future ethical reflection.

Curran may, in fact, have underestimated the methodological requirements of historical consciousness. When his methodology is applied to particular social issues, it becomes evident how difficult it is for one author to attain full, relevant, and adequate historical knowledge of the questions. From this it becomes evident that there is a need for an even more radical commitment to the goals Curran set for his theological project. Bernard Lonergan, whose articulation of the shift from the classicist to the historical worldview so profoundly influenced Curran's project, provides a model for expanding the church-world ethical dialogue into the area of social ethics. His conception of society as a relatively stable but always dynamic outcome of a historical dialectical process provides Catholic theology not only with a model for understanding society, but for participating in the historical dialectic of change. One theory alone will not meet all the needs of developing the formal, structural, analytic and systematic tools that a discipline requires to meet all the exigences of historical consciousness. However, the openings which Curran's methodology has created for the church to take part in an ecumenical, ethical dialogue must and will be widened through a deeper appreciation for and understanding of history and of human experience as historical.

History for Christians is salvation history. This means more than that God has acted in the past to reveal God's wisdom and power and that God will judge the world in the future in the light of the past. Salvation history continues in the daily life of the world, for which the events of revelation are paradigmatic of our current reality. One event in particular spans and makes sense out of all human historical experience: Jesus Christ, the incarnation of the eternal Word of God, the total gift of God to creation and, through human flesh crucified and risen, the total embrace of that gift by creation. Salvation history transpires within a transcendental consciousness of an absolute future that permeates and gives direction to all moral choice. Concern for the future—in its eschatological meaning—has to be built systematically into a Catholic ethical method that can be trusted as “a normative pattern of operations with

cumulative and progressive results.”⁹⁸ Inclusion of the eschatological future in ethical thinking about today frees moral theology to promote “self-transcendence to the point, not merely of justice, but of self-sacrificing love...[to] have a redemptive role in human society inasmuch as such love can undo the mischief of decline and restore the cumulative process of progress.”⁹⁹

In order to capture the transcendental mystery of life in the moral theological project that he undertakes, Curran insists on a perspective that is constructed from five core beliefs of Christianity about the world. He describes his model for ethical life in terms of the religious covenant between God and Israel and the kingdom of God proclaimed by Jesus. He turns to the pascal mystery as paradigmatic of the change and growth that is inherent to human morality. Although when he applies his methodology to substantive social questions it becomes apparent that his method requires greater unity and coherence, he clearly raises the question: how can moral theology integrate religious beliefs and human morality in a way that deepens the church’s faith and makes its dialogue with the world more lucid?

In order to carry Curran’s undertaking further, moral theology will have to accord serious attention to Karl Rahner, who argues that we cannot find the meaning of faith only in doctrine, its history, or interpretation, but in the minds and lives of believers. Curran’s conceptual approach to the meaning of the five Christian mysteries and to the principles and concepts of Thomism simply does not meet the challenge contained in Rahner’s suggestion. The Catholic position in dialogue requires bringing believing men and women together in mutual witness and support, to enter a process of discernment around what choices to make, what actions to undertake to make the reign of God more accessible and tangible on earth.

Decision-making and grounding norms is the final step in Curran’s method. In his studies of social ethics he most frequently makes use of proportionalism to model and measure this process. One can ask, as Stanley Hauerwas does, whether proportionalism is capable of linking ethical reasoning with faith.¹⁰⁰ One can ask whether proportionalism, with its roots in an older natural law ethics, is adequate to the whole new way of rethinking morality and moral theology that Curran calls for. If Rahner is right, what used to be the preserve of moral theology or the hierarchical office now has become the responsibility of the believing

⁹⁸ Lonergan, *Method*, n. 4, 13-14.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 55.

¹⁰⁰ Hauerwas, *In Good Company*, 144-45.

community. The ecumenical, ethical dialogue that transpires in the community ought not to be a haphazard exchange of opinions, but a gathering up of human, religious, ethical experience that then is shared and reflected on through a process of critical, historical cognition and verification in the light of the gospel. The structure of this dialogue still needs to be worked out and is a task that moral theology must address.

The historical character of decision-making as an inquiry into the unknown has an essentially future orientation. This is all the more so for a church formed and motivated by an eschatological faith and which carries the absolute future within it. John Courtney Murray saw this future dimension of the church as the basis “for new insights as the church spanned time—its Gospel-inspired response to its own historicity and that of the societies in which it found itself.”¹⁰¹ The self-knowledge of the church is not only an assurance of faith but also an inquiry into the unknown. Through growing and developing in its historical relationships and responses the “church is to forge its deepest reality.”¹⁰² Rahner’s eschatological description of the *diaspora* church highlights the notion of growth and offers a theological account of how the church not only enters the future but also becomes its own future. The moral theology of the future will find ways to facilitate and support this coming-to-moral-consciousness of the church.

The full import of this moral *consensus fidelium* means that moral theology and hierarchical teaching that are isolated from the community of believers will be able to capture the religious dimension of life only partially.¹⁰³ The questions discussed in dialogue are not simply questions about a world in which Christians and non-Christians live together; they are questions the responses to which determine and bring about what the community of Christian faith is becoming. Curran’s anthropology must be expanded

¹⁰¹ Hooper, *Ethics of Discourse*, 190.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ While this is not a totally innovative idea, it appears in sharp contrast to the centralism and authoritarianism that were the hallmark of the period from Pius IX to Pius XII. Richard J. Penaskovic, in a detailed study of Cardinal Newman’s writings finds several examples of Newman’s conviction that the common understandings of faith and morals that are operative in the lives of the laity influence the church “on a more profound level than that of theological reflection.” At one point Newman even went so far as to describe this common sense of the laity as the “passive infallibility of the whole body of the Catholic people.” See Richard J. Penaskovic, *Open to the Spirit: The Notion of the Laity in the Writings of J. H. Newman* (Augsburg: Werner Blasaditsch, 1972), 214-222, 232-36. This thinking, finally endorsed by Vatican II, has still not found a consistent and effective expression within the Roman Catholic community. See Annette Schavan, ed., *Dialog Statt Dialogverweigerung*.

to include the church as decision maker; not just on a theoretical level, but with practical means that assure that the preconditions of effective dialogue are present.

Curran's theological project is significant for the development of Catholic moral theology for many reasons. Curran takes the still unfinished ideas of Vatican II and makes them into a comprehensible and credible project for moral theology. His theoretical conception of the methodology Catholic social ethics requires for communicating credibly with its own members and with modern society has set a standard for Christian ethical thought. His treatment of specific substantive issues reveals not so much a flaw in his project as an inconsistency in his method and how it is applied. More importantly, Curran's faults indicate the direction and the need for future development, for expanding the dialogue which moral theology is.

A major interest of this study has been to examine how Curran uses his method in particular and significant questions of social living and to analyze how method functions in terms of opening and fostering dialogue. In pursuing that objective, it became clear that Curran was not completely successful in carrying out the historical and relational analyses required by his method. Curran's commitment to a revised natural law method and a chastened Thomism may explain this shortcoming. The movement from the classicist to modern worldview not only represents a differentiation of method from that of the Aristotelian-Thomistic paradigm, but of social, moral consciousness, and the operative social meanings of responsibility, relatedness, and the good that "are constitutive of our social arrangements and cultural intercourse."¹⁰⁴ By remaining within the concepts and constructs of Thomistic ethics, Curran's move to historical consciousness gets caught between two paradigms. His commitment to natural law revision becomes a task of replacing traditional formulations with the language of contemporary culture, leaving little room for the creative development required to fulfill the purposes of his project.

Curran's project comes up against the enormity, complexity, and confusion of the information, interpretations, and values that whirl through every discussion of social ethics. The shortcomings found in Curran's discussions reveal not the mistakes of an errant moralist, but the reality that the issues have become too big for any one person to address adequately. As Rahner observes: "Each theologian always

¹⁰⁴ Lonergan, *Third Collection*, 179.

has to know something more and then this 'something more,' on which he has become an expert becomes 'something less' in relation to what needs to be known. Teamwork and dialogue are indispensable."¹⁰⁵ The ecumenical ethics of dialogue cannot be carried on in academic halls or in learned monographs, but in face-to-face encounters and the process of mutual exchange between many people. The future of Christian ethics will be not only trans-disciplinary, but also Christian community-based. Curran's observations on the blending of the teaching and learning functions of the church are prophetic in this regard. Whether this process can be adequately grasped and supported by a revised Thomism seems, in the light of this thesis, doubtful.

At the beginning of this study I quoted James M. Gustafson, who observed that the difference between the way moral theology was understood in the Catholic Church a half century ago and how it is conceived and pursued today is so great that to account for it requires a story "so dense and complex that perhaps no one can completely tell it at the present time." That change is still taking place. The theological project of Charles Curran in many ways has exposed the challenges, controversies, and convergences that make up a strand of that narrative. Curran's commitment to historical consciousness, a relational understanding of moral responsibility, the importance of the human person, and the transcendental quality that must be part of every authentic human meaning and value are to be seen both as trail blazes and milestones along the way of theological and church renewal. In both the successes and failures of his experiment with method Charles Curran has posed penetrating questions for the church about the meaning of its beliefs and God's active presence in the world. The response to these questions will surpass Curran's exploratory work. Its success will reflect the significance of his inquiry.

¹⁰⁵ Rahner, "Vom Dialog in der Kirche," 441. (my translation)

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