

Dr. J. R. Chandran's Christian Ethics¹

This is perhaps the first attempt in Tamil within the non-Roman churches to produce a textbook on Christian ethics. Dr. Chandran has succeeded in presenting a treatise which, in spite of its brevity, touches upon all aspects of the subject which should be considered in a book intended in particular for students of theology. But the common reader may wish pardonably to skip the earlier parts of the book and concentrate on the last part, which deals with the ethical problems of his home and society and nation.

Having begun with a reference to the last of the five parts in the book, we might as well get all our comments on it over before going on to consider the other parts. Following modern Christian thinkers like Niebuhr, Dr. Chandran deprecates both moral idealism and ethical dogmatism. Dealing with sex and the home, he takes his stand on the basic Christian principles enunciated by J. C. Bennett, and, in the light of them, gives us essentially sound guide-lines for tackling the problems of divorce, planning of the family, and maladjustments in the home. There are helpful illustrations given by the author in this and other sections of the book.

In the next chapter, again, we have a statement of basic Christian principles, applicable this time to wealth and problems of economic justice. The chapter on politics is a short one, and those who have read other Christian books on the subject recently published in Tamil would be already familiar with the ideas in it. In the chapter on War and Peace, there is a realistic treatment of the obligations of a Christian when his country is engaged in fighting off aggression. But the prohibition of war and violence is made absolute for the behaviour of Christians as individuals or as a church.

On gambling and debauchery the author rules out the framing of ultra-puritanical or legalistic new commandments. But he makes a convincing statement of the *ethical* grounds on which they must be held to be wrong on the part of Christians. For the sake of brevity, observations on caste and communalism

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may be summed up as a whole sermon on sin is said to have been done by President Coolidge in the word 'against'.

BASIC PRINCIPLES OF CHRISTIAN ETHICS

In the second part, Dr. Chandran explains that Christian ethics are based on God's revelation to man of his own true nature and on man's response to that revelation. He quotes both the affirmation of T. W. Manson in his *Ethics and the Gospel* that Christian ethics are the outcome of God's revelation, and the texts with which he supports it. The author cannot mean, however, that to every individual Christian all ethical knowledge comes only as the result of his personal relationship with God. For the chapters on what are called the 'bases' of Christian ethics are virtually treatises on the ethical teachings of the Bible. Dr. Chandran first expounds the Ten Commandments and the lofty ethical precepts of the prophets. He also deals with several of the codifications of miscellaneous regulations scattered over the whole of the Pentateuch, and points out the elements of permanent value in them, which have been integrated into the teaching of the New Testament.

Dr. Chandran endorses the view that Jesus presents his ethical demands as attributes of those who desire to be members of the Kingdom of God, rather than as a code for all mankind. Having made this clear, he goes on to give an exposition of the Beatitudes. The rest of the Sermon on the Mount is summed up in four paragraphs—dealing respectively with being salt and light to the world, righteousness superior to that of the legalists, faith in God, and willingness to return good for evil. Part 4 is an account of how great thinkers such as Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Luther and Niebuhr have taught that the ethical precepts of Jesus should be applied to the life of the individual man and to society.

At this point, we might comment on two tendencies in the book which are characteristic of most other Christian writings on ethics too. The first of these is to belittle, or fail to take note of, the moral enlightenment in other religions. In the last chapter of this book, for example, the author extols 'the fruit of the spirit'—and love, their essence—as 'Christian' virtues. But such a claim of pre-eminence for the ethical tenets of Christianity would be disputed not only by men of other faiths, but by Christians as well. One has only to recall what G. U. Pope said a hundred years ago about ethical classics in Tamil poetry to show how such a claim is a very hollow one to make. Describing the *Kural* as 'an apple of gold in a network of silver', he said, 'English friends will find little to unteach in the moral lessons of the *Kural*.' On another ethical poem in Tamil he commented, 'I have felt sometimes as if there must be a blessing in store for a people that delight so

utterly in compositions thus remarkably expressive of a hunger and thirst after righteousness.' In the face of such judgements, should Christians not be satisfied with an exposition of Christian ethics, instead of going beyond to make claims of superior excellence for it?

The other assertion that calls for comment is that Christian ethics are *sui generis*. It is true that, to the Christian, both the beginning of ethical wisdom and the end of all ethical striving is Jesus himself, and that he gives his allegiance to Jesus and not to an ethical code. It may also be granted that both the motive force and sustaining power for Christian action are to be found in love and obedience to Christ. But does all this make the *content* of Christian ethics considerably different from those of other systems? On the contrary, is there not an agreement between them so profound that we may exclaim with Paul and Barnabas that God has not left himself without witnesses, at least in those other systems we know of in India?

There are two important practical consequences of what appears to be a confusion between the content and dynamics of Christian ethics. One of them is the widespread negative attitude of the authorities of Christian schools and colleges to moral instruction. Many of them are half-hearted about such instruction in their institutions, because they believe that they ought not to have anything to do with ethics that is not associated with the person of Christ. But we must now ask whether there is not more of peevishness than piety in the attitude of Christians who would withhold the noble teachings of Christ also where they cannot pass on the good news of the Saviour. In the land of Gandhi and Vinobha, however, men will themselves get those teachings out of the Bible, even though Christians should refuse to help them out of a distorted sense of 'mission'. Said an educated Hindu gentleman who had spent a few years in the West, 'When I graduated, a copy of the Bible was presented to me for my "careful reading and reverent study"'. I took the exhortation in earnest and I have been reading the book most carefully. I do not think there is any teaching in the world more profound than that of Jesus telling men that they should seek the Kingdom of God first, and that, if they do so, all other things would also be given to them. But I have a Christian friend who keeps on telling me that my understanding of the Gospels is all wrong. I cannot believe that; for I am a man with a fair degree of intelligence and I can easily understand the English language in which I read the Bible.'

The second practical issue is that of co-operation with men of other faiths in India in the search for ethical principles for a new social order. It is a commonplace of Indian sociology that values have gone into the melting pot in our country after Independence. In an earlier age Christian missionaries, and a liberal education shot through with Christian values, succeeded

in blasting away social evils like untouchability. Today the Church faces an even greater challenge—and opportunity—to provide an undergirding of ethical principles for the new political and social structures which are rising over the ruins of the old. Should Christians respond to this challenge or ignore it because they will have no truck with morals without the Master ?

THEOLOGY AND ETHICS

In the first part, the author shows how ethics is related to psychology, sociology and moral theology. He then gives very brief accounts of different ethical systems, religious or other, pointing out the limitations of each of them. He dismisses Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam with less than a page each for their ethical systems. If a more comprehensive analysis of them had not been possible, they should have been omitted altogether.

In the third part, Dr. Chandran reverts to the theological basis for Christian ethics. Part of the thesis here—especially that in which he deals with the doctrines of the Fall and the Sacraments—is stated as dogma which he does not try to commend to the understanding of the reader. There is no space here except to raise the question which, incidentally, Chenchiah raised twenty years ago, whether it is not time for Christian theologians to try and explain the need of man to find God (or to be found by Him) in terms other than those of a mythical Fall. On the whole the author leans heavily on the traditional theology of the West, where, presumably because ethical systems developed within the Christian religion, the breakdown of faith threatens to bring about the collapse of those systems also. It might have been interesting to make a comparative study of both the independence and interdependence of religion and ethics in India where, as in the case of the *Kural*, even the religion of the author or exponent of an ethical system is in doubt.

In his book, *The Christian in Society*, Jeremiah Newman, the Catholic writer, deplors the 'division' between dogmatic theology and moral theology. The professor of moral theology, he says, is content 'to preface his treatment of moral questions with a few words on their dogmatic implications', while the professor of dogma is ever 'ready to point out that the full title for moral theology is "dogmatic moral theology"'. Dr. Chandran's exposition of ethics only proves the validity of Newman's contention that there is a pressing need to work out 'a fundamental moral theology which would present men with the Christian *Weltanschauung*—with the divine meaning for the world and human life, for matter and the earth, for health and for suffering, for progress and for support'.

D. A. THANGASAMY

St. John's College
Palayamkottai