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A MORAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY

INTRODUCTION TO CHRISTIAN ETHICS

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BY

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I'm not sure how much of my morality can be specifically called "Christian morality." Two values that I would rate very highly are openness and compassion, which happen to be perfectly Buddhist, if one wishes. I wonder what it means to tag a morality as "Christian."

A story from my mother reflects pretty well my own upbringing as a Christian. She was recently called upon to teach a confirmation class, and the one message of Christianity that she felt sure she could impart was Jesus's teaching in Matthew 22.37-40: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets." Beyond that, she treads pretty lightly.

For my father, the fundamental message in life is delivered by Shakespeare in Hamlet: "This above all: to thine own self be true..." He does not so often quote the part that continues: "...and it must follow as the night the day, thou canst not then be false to any man." But the relationality to which the Bard points is essential to ethics. Shakespeare's insight also tugs up back to a prior requirement given by Socrates, the ethical imperative to *know yourself*. Yet this is the hardest thing. I believe it is possible for a person to live an entire life and yet never really know, or be, herself. But what then can she give?

Though the church's moral teachings undoubtedly had a big influence on me as a kid, they were never delivered to me with any great force. I attended church and Sunday school; my family sang a little grace at dinner; but there was very little conversation about God or the church or any kind of moral authority. My parents delivered moral instructions to me all the time, but they were never couched in specifically Christian terms. Of course, just because nobody said, "This is the Christian thing to do" doesn't mean it isn't the case. Though my parents perhaps did not attend to the Christian story with a very deep commitment, still, they made sure that the

teachings got to me: no doubt by the age of twelve I could have told various of Jesus's parables and some of the basics of what Christianity is supposed to be telling us – love your neighbor, love God, God loves you, Christ died for us...why was that again?

However, much of the church's talk was impenetrable to me. I remember the words being recited each week at the service like so many formulas. The parishoners seemed to have one foot in the grave. I came through confirmation with an overwhelming sense of being put through a rote formality in which nobody involved was at all engaged. I wondered why they bothered; I felt that I'd learned nothing; it was more like they were trying to avoid saying anything that they couldn't back up. Yet I remember, at about age twelve, sitting in the church pew thinking to myself, "There's something really important going on here, but it's *not here* in this room. This is all pointing to something, but the things they're saying aren't getting to it. I have to try to find it myself." I frequently look back on that moment as the beginning of my becoming reflective and aware. I *always* believed. But I entered my self-formative years with both a Christian framework and some skepticism about it.

In any case, it's a mistake to dwell entirely on church and family as sources of either my commitment or my skepticism regarding the foundations of morality. My earliest *political* memory is of my mother listening to coverage of Watergate on the radio. I was about six. For a brief period, my respect for authority had been such that I thought we were supposed to insert the president's first name in the pledge of allegiance: I used to say, "...and to the republic, for *Richard* stands..."! But soon I learned that the president was a lying creep who was being run out of the Oval Office on a rail. My view of politics will probably always be a dark one – Nelson Mandela is the only truly burning political light I can point to in my lifetime.

As I entered my teens, a source of moral reflection that I consider very important came into my life straight from the shantytowns of Jamaica. From the moment I was introduced to

reggae music at about the age of 13, it was love. Bob Marley and the Wailers, Black Uhuru, Burning Spear, Peter Tosh...they all proclaimed the socially charged message of Rastafarianism, in music intensely rich in biblical references: “By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, and there we wept, when we remembered Zion...but the wicked carried us away in captivity...”; “Exodus, movement of the people...”; “The stone that the builder refused will always be the head corner stone...”. They sang urgent messages about (in)justice and (dis)unity: “Oh, slave ships, yes they take me...”; “Take me to the border, so I can step across...”; “I don’t want no peace, I want equal rights and justice...”; “This apartheid system is Nazi, Nazi, Nazi...”; “Get up, stand up, stand up for your rights...”; “Downpressor man, where you gonna run to? You’re gonna run to the sea, the sea will be boiling...”

It matters that a white kid from Connecticut could really hear these voices coming out of another world – a world of dismal poverty and injustice, crying out to a world that could not care less. I listened to thousands of hours of this message and I sought out the performers. I believe that these poets shaped my morality in fundamental ways. They’ve left me with a nagging sense that the world in which I live, in some sense, *is* Babylon. They’ve left me unable to sit back and accept a world that is constructed in so inequitable and unjust a manner.

And this leads us to my main ethical commitment today, which is squarely Christian. It is to expand the meaning and scope of the injunction: “love your neighbor as yourself.” I think that, as one pushes that idea further and further, it must lead to a *global* call for justice, liberation, and some enhancement of equity and equality. In my mind, it should be most obvious that this essential Christian ethic entails a preference for the poor and oppressed – including the oppressed earth. Most challengingly from my perspective, the liberatory call must somehow be heard by people of privilege. I understand this ethic as one that goes against the grain of nature in the raw, in which evolution often favors the inequities, having no regard for fairness. But this ethic does

not go against the grain of *humanness*, in which culture contains – often despite itself – a relentless strain of inclusiveness, of help, of an unaccountable goodness.

In practical terms, such an ethics means: we should not accept that the poorest hundreds of millions of people in the world are born into debt that is not their responsibility, yet which steals from their education, their healthcare, and their employment prospects; we should not accept the undermining – by our own government – of worldwide consensus on actions to reduce global warming; we should not accept the fact that our diplomats rejected a worldwide consensus that the limbs of tens of thousands of people should be spared from being blown off by land mines in the 21st century; we should not accept the fact that our nation is forcefully pushing into a new, expansive phase of the global arms race, undermining antiballistic missiles treaties so as to put weaponry into outer space; we should not accept living in a prosperous nation that manages to imprison its citizens at five times the world average. These are a few examples of priorities that I see growing out of an effort to expand the meaning of “love your neighbor as yourself.” I would add that it follows that the satisfaction that many of us feel about Bill Clinton’s leadership deserves to be shaken down to the core.

I do not mean to downplay personal and interpersonal morality with my examples. It should be clear that one begins with one’s own little circle, and that the conduct of one’s affairs within that sphere will have the same tenor as that of one’s approach to the wider circles of humanity and of earth. But I do think that those who wish to play with theology have a special obligation to look ever further outward, to analyze, criticize, and work for change in the broader relations that make our world.

Continuing along this line, I am more interested in pursuing a universal ethics than a Christian ethics. I realize that, in saying that, I am contradicting the claim that Christian ethics *is* universal ethics. All I mean to say, though, is that, in the real world, non-Christians have their

own fully functioning moralities. I am interested in finding the commonalities among them all. What can we say is a *universal human ethics* for our time?

Pursuing that question leads us, of course, into a world of *difference*, and I think that we must not fear the difference; rather, we must learn from it. I have recently been studying Buddhism, and I have to say it has given me a fresh perspective on my Christian morality and on Christian thinking generally. In this light, one thing about the foundations of Christian morality that disturbs me is the impression I have that it is, in a certain sense, *selfish*. What I mean by this is that I see the Christian tradition as being closely wed to a conception of *self* that can lead to difficulties in achieving the kind of ethics which I have outlined. I think that the Christian image of self/soul is so solidified, and so unchanging, that to conceive of oneself in its terms can lead to a serious degrading of the reality of our interconnectedness, our oneness, our common humanity.

This imagined Christian self/soul is probably in some sense lurking behind our American “rugged individualism,” which proceeds even to the level of the atomized physical makeup of contemporary American cities and suburbs, and the SUV beetles which inhabit them. I am suggesting that, in the same way that we are locked into our conceptions of our eternal souls, we are locked into the very separateness that we embody and feel in our homes and on our streets. I am suggesting that we can allow ourselves to play much more with this idea of self, treating as something far more tentative and malleable that we do today.

I think that our morality ought to be about opening ourselves up and at the same time reaching out, going beyond ourselves, finding the wisdom in others and, especially, not hiding from the pain and fear – of ourselves, of others, of the world. Instead of hiding, we should be working to find ways of taking the pain and fear and transforming it.