

THE FOUNDATION OF OUR LAWS AND MORALS

There are those who say that there can be a foundation for the moral values of society without Christianity or indeed any other religion – but I say that they are wrong. Without moral values imposed from without – from a higher authority there are no justifiable moral values. We are forced to fall back on pragmatism and utility.

An abandonment of absolute moral standards end up being a licence to do whatever we feel like doing. The approach to lessen Christian influence may be illustrated from the attempts of The People for the American Way. Norman Lear and his disciples sought to confuse the issues by saying the American way is to let everyone have his own view of morality, unfettered in expression under the law. Some people like scrambled eggs, some hardboiled. Some people like football, some baseball. Some like heterosexual sex, some homosexual sex. This is the American way. The attempt of Lear to classify preference for eggs and sports with moral decisions on sex and abortion is not dissimilar to the confusion Douglas postulated in his debates with Lincoln in 1858. Douglas said he considered slavery wrong but preferred to leave it to the states to decide for themselves. Lincoln replied: “When Judge Douglas says that whoever, or whatever community, wants slaves, they have a right to have them, he is perfectly logical if there is nothing wrong in the institution; but if you admit that it is wrong, he cannot logically say that anybody has a right to do a wrong.”.

When we come down to it all the foundations of the whole legal system of our society are based on Christian moral values.

Jesus replaced the old legalistic system with an emphasis on morality – this is the foundation of our modern legal and ethical systems.

UNLESS MORALITY IS IMPOSED BY GOD IT HAS NO LOGICAL JUSTIFICATION.

Insofar as we find morality based on Christian values appealing it is solely because these moral values have been built into us by God.

The ‘*Didache’ contains perhaps the earliest Christian treatise of moral theology in its teaching of the Two Ways, and the ‘Shepherd’ of *Hermas gives a compendium of Christian moral teaching in the twelve ‘Mandates’. *Clement of Alexandria produced guides to the Christian life in the ‘Protrepticus’ and ‘Paedagogus’, which give a detailed description of the morality of the true Christian. *Tertullian taught that the will of God was the first principle of the moral life, and he and St *Cyprian wrote several practical treatises on patience, almsgiving, and virginity. With the conversion of large numbers of pagans in the 4th cent. strict moral teaching became particularly urgent. It was given in the E. by, among others, all three *Cappadocian Fathers, and by St *Cyril of Jerusalem, esp. in his ‘Catecheses’. In the W. St *Ambrose produced a Christian counterpart to Cicero’s ‘De Officiis’ in his ‘De Officiis Ministrorum’. St Augustine’s adaptation of classical and *Neoplatonist thought to Christian theological purposes was the dominant patristic influence on W. medieval ethical thought. He established *charity (or love) as the fundamental principle of Christian morality from which flow all other virtues (esp. in his ‘Enchiridion’ and ‘De Moribus’), and he wrote smaller treatises on marriage, continence, and similar subjects. The moral teaching of antiquity was summed up by St *Gregory I in his ‘Moralium Libri XXV’ and ‘Liber Regulae Pastoralis’, in which also were laid the foundations of medieval developments.

New, needs were reflected in the appearance of the ‘*Penitential Books’, dating from the 5th–7th cents. These deal with the practical moral requirements of the newly-converted barbarians and reflect the resulting weakening of the penitential practice of the Church. Most medieval thought followed St Augustine in his orientation towards the *summum bonum* of mankind, identified objectively with God, and subjectively with ultimate happiness (which was sited by some in the volitional act of love, and by others in the intellectual act of *contemplation). The criterion of moral action was conformity to the Divine law known through Scripture and reflection on natural experience. *Platonism was the dominant philosophical inspiration until the revival of *Aristotelianism in the 13th cent., largely under the influence of St Thomas Aquinas. Building on St Augustine and Aristotle, Aquinas devoted the whole of the second part of his ‘Summa Theologiae’ to moral theology, treating it from the point of view of the speculative theologian, and linking it closely to *natural law, the natural and supernatural virtues, and the gifts of the Holy Spirit. At the same time precursors of the modern casuistry made their appearance with *Raymond of Peñafort’s famous ‘Summa de Poenitentia’ (c.1225), a compilation of relevant passages from the Fathers, Councils, and Papal decisions, and a century later, with the even more practical so-called ‘Summa Astensis’ of an unknown *Franciscan of Asti, in Italy (c.1317). In the 14th and 15th cents. a large number of similar ‘Summae’ were produced, usually arranged in alphabetical order, one of the most celebrated being the ‘Summa Theologica Moralis’ of St *Antoninus of Florence, which proved an important source of information for all subsequent manuals of casuistry.