

**ETHICAL PATTERNS IN EARLY CHRISTIAN THOUGHT**, by Eric Osborn.  
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There has been a lot of discussion recently of the question what is specifically Christian about Christian ethics. Is it the content, or only the context? At one extreme is the view that ethics is autonomous, rational and universal. Our moral duties are such that no divine revelation is required to validate them, and no divine revelation can make them other than rational reflection declares them to be. At the other extreme is the view that the life and teaching of Jesus Christ, put an end to the whole human endeavour to construct a rational morality. Christ is the end of the moral law.

In this discussion it is not always clear what is to count as morality. Is it the basic and minimal order which is necessary for the existence and continuation of almost any conceivable society, so that what goes beyond this minimum is reckoned a matter of divergent ideals and not of fundamental morality? Or may it be taken to include those visions and patterns of individual and social life which are affirmed to be the expressions of fundamental human needs rather than of individual preferences and inclinations? If the second, then is it possible to point to specifically Christian patterns of morality which shape the content of Christian behaviour as well as provide its source and inspiration?

Professor Osborn uses the concept of ethical patterns to illuminate the shape and structure of Christian morality in the New Testament and the early centuries of Christian teaching. His basic thesis is that Christian morality, reflecting the theological theme of the Word made flesh, is formed by a creative tension between perfection and contingency. The call to perfection carries with it a strand of negative ethics as well as of positive ethics, while the recognition of contingency prevents the illusion that truly spiritual Christians have already passed out of life in this world into a new and heavenly sphere. If the tension is broken, enthusiasm or legalism takes over.

Within this basic form he discovers and develops four constitutive patterns—of righteous, discipleship, faith and love. The ways in which these patterns are given

concrete shape are described and assessed, first in the New Testament itself, and then in the writings of Clement of Alexandria, Basil the Great, John Chrysostom and Augustine of Hippo. Finally, Osborn considers the value and validity of this 'patterned' approach in connection with certain theological and ethical issues which are alive today. He compares the pattern of righteousness with the concept of natural law, asks whether discipleship can still be exercised in view of widespread scepticism concerning our knowledge of the historical Jesus, espouses a form of Christian Platonism in the debate about the relation between faith and philosophy, and outlines the difference between Christian love and a so-called situational ethic.

All in all, this is an extremely valuable book. It gives a shape to the moral teaching of the early Church Fathers, which so often appears as unconnected and incidental. If they did not have a full-blown ethical theory of the type beloved by moral philosophers, they were not simply voicing the unreflective wisdom of their culture. It had a pattern and a form, and these derived from their fundamental convictions concerning God's presence in and for the world. If at times asceticism came perilously near being an end in itself, this was a kind of inner contradiction of their fundamental approach, occasioned by the licentiousness which they were rejecting rather than by the logic of their own position.

Osborn has given us a book which combines deep scholarship with a lightness and sureness of touch and a concern for our contemporary understanding of Christian morality. His philosophical Platonism is all the more interesting because it is unfashionable—although he finds a doughty champion of the kind of approach he is commending in the writings of Iris Murdoch. Whether she would approve of this alliance I am not so sure! But at least the *seriousness* of morality is a shared theme—and, as readers will soon discover for themselves, seriousness is not necessarily to be equated with solemnity (see, for example, page 186!)

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