“Contemplative experience wants to speak of ‘God’s will’ as ‘God’s wishing-to-be-in-us’” (Moore, 1977: 209). This pregnant observation by Sebastian Moore instantly puts into proper perspective the unfruitfulness of certain classical puzzles in theological thinking about ethics. Is good good because God commands it or does God will the good because it is good? It depends how you are thinking about the very notion of the good: if it is substantively related to actual relationship with God, if human beings are made so that their final and complete flourishing as humans is in relation with God, then the terms of the argument change somewhat. The good life is not a condition of winning God’s pleasure but the very form of “God’s pleasure” in us; that is, it is a life in which reconciliation with God shapes what is thought and done in such a way that, in some sense, the “form” of God’s life becomes perceptible. What God wants is to be manifestly there in what God has created; thus what God wants in the shape of human lives is the fading away of what prevents divine life being visible in us. The good is grounded neither in a divine decision, a setting of rules solely by an abstract divine freedom, nor in a divine acknowledgment of some eternal and independent ideal; it is grounded in the character of God as “wishing to be in the other,” as acting so as to diffuse divine life.

As the chapters in this volume amply show, this would have been pretty obvious to Christian theologians for some three-quarters of Christian history; it is – by a rather roundabout route, I agree – the theological impulse that molded some of the Reformers’ language about justification, no less than it molded the earlier refusals of Augustine and St Thomas to separate God’s will from God’s nature, or Pseudo-Dionysius and his followers and commentators, including Thomas, to define the divine goodness as “self-diffusion.” God’s nature is to be active, and the act that is God-being-God is essentially one of self-imparting, self-sharing. That is the God discerned and responded to as a result of the events of the life and death and rising of Jesus. Any moral discourse that suggests a passive or reactive God misses the central point; so, to consider forms of behavior simply in terms of whether they are pleasing to God, in any way
that implies a God who reacts to and judges them from a distance, presents problems for a fully theological ethic. For a human act to be pleasing to God is for a human act to be the “carrier” of some quality of divine action, to participate in divine action; for a human act to be unpleasing to God, to be sinful, is for it to be opaque to divine action (and it is not prevented from being opaque by the good will or good faith of the human agent; theological ethics needs to challenge a certain religious sentimentality about good intentions, and to take the consideration of sin beyond the level of individual achievement or failure).

Christians exist, so they claim, because God’s action has become visible and tangible in an unsurpassable way in the events of Jesus’s earthly life. In reflection on what it was that brought into being a distinctive human group with these practices and these priorities in worship and action, Christians drew conclusions about the character of God which became the normative grammar for talking of God: divine life is threefold, and it is so because of a “generativity” in that life, an irreducible movement into what is other – the Father and the Word, the Father and the Spirit, the Spirit’s entire absorption in witness to the Word, the Word’s self-emptying in witness to the Father. If divine life were not like that, we couldn’t make sense of there being anything other than divine life; but if God is by nature generative of “the other,” it makes perfect sense that the “will,” the specific direction of intelligence and purpose, that is exercised by that divine nature should generate what is by nature other than God – the contingent universe. But just as in the divine life itself otherness is reconciled in what we could call a mutual transparency (the Father’s life flowering “in” the Son, the Spirit existing as the bearer of the Son’s radiance, and so on), so in the relation of God to creation: the non-divinity of creation achieves its full purpose when it bears and manifests the glory of God. Hence the Wisdom traditions which see the world, including the world of human habit and behavior, as tracing and transmitting the divine life.

And hence the vision of ethical reflection that animates this book: to learn what the good life is, we have to enquire about where the “pressure” of God, to use another phrase from Sebastian Moore, is encountered, recalled, reinforced. Vigen Guroian, in an essay on “Tradition and Ethics” (Guroian, 1994: 42), draws attention (following Wayne Meeks) to the way in which Paul, discussing matters of behavior, regularly appeals to the fact of baptism and what is learned in preparation for baptism: the fundamental truth about the Christian is that he or she has died to the slavery of fallenness and been raised to the life of Christ. Behavioral priorities follow from this, not from any general argument about the good life. Baptism is the point of transition between lives, even identities, the place where transparency to God’s otherness begins in earnest as both a fact and a project that is shared, talked about, explored, and consciously worked at. And, a few pages later (1994: 50), Guroian writes of what the icon represents in Orthodox practice: “It is a material representation of the human and divine dialogue that constitutes the church and in which the church invites others to participate . . . Orthodox ethics is, in a fundamental sense, iconic ethics.”

“Iconic ethics” is not a bad summary of what the present volume has attempted to present as the primary character of a theological ethic. If we wanted to put it very radically, we could say that behavior is not, for the Christian, “good” or “bad”; it is transparent or opaque, truthful or illusory, grounded in life or leading to death, in the sense
that it is assessed in relation to its response to God’s “wishing-to-be-in-us.” To borrow the language of another eastern Christian writer, Christos Yannaras (1984), theological ethics has to be “ontological” in character. The good life is the life in which reality (God’s reality) is dominant—a view which has nothing to do with the modern rhetoric of authenticity or truth to the “real self,” since the self’s reality is wholly dependent on its relation with God. And to the degree that this relation is known as freely and unreservedly bestowed on the human agent, the good life is one in which anxiety is characteristically absent: “every good work is in itself nothing but faith or confidence,” as John Milbank puts it (1997: 230), accurately summarizing Luther’s account of Christian virtue.

Baptism is the moment of critical transition; the Eucharist is where the transition is newly presented and activated by the community. Here God’s wishing-to-be-in-us is made immediate in two inseparable ways: by the recital of the story of incarnation and kenosis, in the proclamation of the Word and the recitation of the Institution narrative; and in the offer of divine life as physical food, given at the hand of a Christ who is present, actively inviting the congregation and at the same time actively giving himself on their behalf to the Father. To accept the invitation is not to receive a gift that is simply assimilated into the receiver; the receiver is transformed into one who enacts Christ’s action, first and foremost in sharing Christ’s prayerful movement into the life of the Father, derivatively in assuming again the baptismal role in the world at large, which is to proclaim and make visible what Christ is and does. And crucial to this process, of course, is that it happens as the whole Church gathers, offering no definition of itself other than that of the assembly convened by Christ as his praying Body on earth. Thus, a eucharistic ethic, as the preceding pages again make plain, is far more than an affirmation that “community” and material sharing are good and God-worthy things, or that human fellowship around a religious focus is highly significant for our flourishing. It is rather a statement about how God comes to be in us, because of God’s nature and action in eternity, God’s nature and action in the history of divine dealings with human agents, and because of the specific covenantal promise of Jesus to renew his invitation and welcome to us when we break bread in his name and presence and power.

One corollary of much of the argument of the chapters in this volume is that the stumblings and tangles of a good deal of contemporary moral argument on ethical questions arise from an impoverished doctrine of the Church and of the will of God. We have obscured the centrality of understanding the Church as creatura Verbi, the community brought into being by God’s communication, which is a communication not only of words or information but of new life; we have misconstrued the will of God as a wanting of specific outcomes, apparently rather arbitrary in character, rather than a way of speaking about the “pressure” of God’s self-diffusion (see Moore, 1977: 204–5 and 208 for the notion of divine will as pressure). To step back a little from the heat of some such contemporary debates enables us not only to look freshly at what have become stale arguments, but also to see something of what has been lost in our theology more generally. Contrary to what is often said, there is no ultimate contradiction between a narratively shaped theology and a robust theological metaphysic (see Williams, 2000: 239–64 for an attempt to counter the perception of such a contradiction). Understand the energy of the narrative as deriving from the unconstrained
energy of the self-diffusing God, and you can see the connections. The real contradiction is between a narrative theology that never quite allows itself to claim that the story of God’s dealings with us “inscribes” in time the character of the eternal God, and a metaphysic that divorces behavior from the manifestation of God on the grounds that the divine nature is not truly bestowed or participated in the world. Modern relativism (ethical or religious) regularly includes both of these flawed approaches; a theological ethics of the sort here sketched may have the welcome effect of bringing to light their inadequacy.

There are important tactical and rhetorical differences in Christian usage between talking about “goodness” and talking about “holiness.” But they depend largely on our prevailing conventions: “holiness” can be opposed to “goodness” to the extent that it is culturally assumed that goodness is a matter of either temperament or achievement, whereas holiness can be presented as gift and epiphany. But, of course, this will not do in the long run. All that has been said here assumes that the only kind of goodness worth nurturing is gift and epiphany; there is really no gap between this and holiness. We may from time to time get into the habit of speaking of certain sorts of harmlessness or benevolence, self-disciplined or cooperative behavior as “good,” but our theology ought to make us uncomfortable with such usage. Even (or especially) when we speak of the “goodness” of the unbeliever, we ought to be doing more than ascribing to them an inoffensive tractability; instead, we should be aware of the theological challenge that is posed by the experience of seeing in a life that is not conventionally a life of faith more than the liver of that life sees, seeing something of epiphany, response to the wanting-to-be-in-us of God. The good we are interested in is simply God’s presence among us.

And that takes us back to where we started. Recognizing and responding to God’s presence among us means recognizing something about the very nature of God: a God the “pressure” of whose being is toward the other, so intensely that the eternal divine life itself is a pattern of interweaving difference that then animates a world of time, change, differentiation, in which the unifying calling for all things and persons is to show forth God in the way each one is uniquely capable of doing. Or, more succinctly, Christian ethics is about giving glory to the giver of glory.

References


