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Responsibility, Faith And College Theology

Michael Barnes

1. *Some General Observations*

A man is responsible for the consequences of his own actions. This is what it means to claim that man is free. This constitutes the most fundamental note of difference between man and other animals. To deny responsibility for one's own actions is to refuse to be human.

Man is less free than he might like to be. Psychology has convincingly argued that heredity and environment are strongly determinant of a man's actions. And perhaps there are no sure proofs that man has genuinely free choice. Nonetheless, in order that men may live together, they must hold each other responsible for their actions. Men must act on the assumption that other men are free to decide what they do or do not do, free to reflect or not reflect on the consequences of their actions.

There are two elements in a responsible choice. The choice must be based on an accurate perception of reality and on a moral sense. To decide to act without learning the realities of a situation or to act without concern for the potentially good or bad consequences of the action is to behave irresponsibly. No one can give guarantees that his knowledge and his moral sense are adequate to the complexities of life. Yet each man must try as best he can to seek the knowledge and moral understanding that will allow him to choose what is good.

A man needs knowledge of data, presuppositions, logic. He needs analytic habits of mind to clarify what is important and determinative in experience. He needs a critical sense to have proper wariness of opinions disguised as fact, prejudices posing as accurate insight. And he needs a habit of seeing things from a moral perspective, from a point of view that makes visible that which is good or bad, constructive or destructive in the patterns of life.

No man accomplishes all of this. No one has always done his best to accept fully the responsibility for his own actions, to learn all that he can about a situation, to analyze the various factors, to develop and apply a delicate conscience to the choices he must make. The picture of the fully moral man is not drawn to present to men a goal they must achieve or suffer condemnation. It is simply a picture to remind men what they are. They are beings who can choose which direction their lives will take – towards or away from the challenge of freedom and responsibility.

2. *The University*

In our society the university is or can be one of the main means of speaking to men

about this choice, about the patterns of thought and action that are more human or less human, more responsible or less responsible. This is what is known as a humane education. This education is ordered not simply to producing a better salesman, engineer, or teacher, but to producing a better man. There are limits upon a humane education's ability to produce better men. No one can produce what is truly human — freedom, selfhood, love, moral sensitivity. Such things cannot be produced but only evoked. The root of responsibility is the choice to accept responsibility; the potential to be free can be actualized only by a choice for freedom and the responsibility it entails. The choice need not be, and probably will not be, a simple dramatic choice. But at least a pattern of conscious acceptance of freedom and responsibility can be developed.

There are a variety of ways in which a humane education makes this choice more available, more real and open to a man. The various sciences and arts provide a mountain of data and experiences to be assimilated or shared. The habits of critical analysis and logical synthesis are used and taught in every field in one way or another. The hidden assumptions and prejudices a man carries with him are exposed by history, philosophy, the social sciences. Finally, there are at least some academic fields (such as philosophy and theology) which present clearly the problem of man as a moral being, and thereby present the challenge to men — shall they be moral or not?

The fact, however, that a college curriculum can be used to evoke a sense of humane responsibility in the students in not assurance that it will be used this way. For very much of what goes on at a college or university is not a humane education but vocational training.

This is quite clear, for example, in engineering courses. Strictly speaking engineering does not educate a man about humane responsibilities. An engineer is a man, of course, and as a man will have some moral concerns. He can be aware of human needs as well as engineering requirements in deciding where to build an expressway. But engineering of itself is not a source of moral judgments.

This non-moral aspect of education can also be present, however, in liberal arts courses. It is at least possible for courses in history or psychology to avoid making any moral judgments on the ideas or techniques involved. A given psychologist or historian may even want to argue that moral judgments have absolutely no place in their respective fields. Furthermore, a teacher in any liberal arts course may feel that his training has not given him the competence to raise moral questions. (Whether this last objection is valid or not is open to question. One may have to be an ethicist to solve some moral problems but not to point out that the problems exists, that there is a question of responsibility involved in how certain knowledge or methods are used by the students.)

Whatever may be the case, however, for most departments of study, philosophy and theology carry a special responsibility, especially in those courses offered to students as part of their general education requirements. For it is these two fields which are presumably most directly concerned with the moral dimension of man's life. The nature of man, how he relates to other men, the ultimate value and meaning of a man's life — such topics lie within the competence of philosophers and theologians.

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There is no intent here to argue that every teacher of philosophy or theology in every class must raise moral questions. A philosophy or theology class might study the methods and ideas of Anselm and Abelard without attempting to ask which ideas and attitudes are more conducive to leading a responsible life. There is no need to take a stand on whether the submissive Anselm or the rebellious Abelard is a better model to follow in one's own life. This is especially true in courses designed for majors in a field, whose interests in the subject may be primarily professional rather than personal. Nor is the intent here to argue that every teacher of philosophy or theology, who is teaching a general course, must be careful to submit every topic to critical and moral evaluation in the classroom. A teacher must be free to raise for consideration in the classroom whatever it is he feels he can best handle.

The intent here is rather to argue that any teacher in a general course who does engage in such critical evaluation is doing something proper to his role and worthwhile for the students. To consider every idea offered, whether in philosophy or theology, as an object of critical evaluation, is a good way to make explicit what is involved in responsible human behavior. All ideas or beliefs have some consequences. The responsible man is one who realizes this and accepts the burden of evaluating all ideas or beliefs in the light of their possible moral consequences. To engage in such evaluation in the classroom is academically legitimate and humanly valuable.

3. *College Theology and Faith*

A critical stance in theology classes, however, presents a definite problem. The perennial conflict between faith and reason appears. How, for example, should a theology teacher treat the Christian belief that Jesus is God? Does he ask the students to critically evaluate evidence for and against this belief and come to their own conclusions? Does he ask the students to decide whether men are more helped or hurt by this belief so that the students can decide on this basis whether to accept or reject this belief?

A teacher in theology might escape this dilemma simply by explaining as clearly as he can what various Christian churches hold to be true. He may refuse to evaluate how reasonable or constructive such beliefs may be. It is a delicate matter to sit in judgment upon religious beliefs. It may well seem best to avoid such judgments.

There are a few occasions when it seems easy and legitimate in the classroom to argue against certain religious ideas. Many college teachers, for example, would reject a fundamentalist interpretation of the bible. They would thereby be rejecting those religions which are fundamentalist. Analytical reasoning and research are employed; not perhaps to prove the fundamentalist religions to be wrong, for proof is difficult, but to show that it is unreasonable to take a fundamentalist position.

In a more cautious way, a college theology teacher may raise a moral question about specific religious beliefs. For example, the Church of Latter Day Saints has been criticized for some time because of its belief that Negroes bear the mark of Cain and are therefore excluded from Mormon priesthood. In view of the importance of the issue of relations between black people and white people in the United States, it would seem legitimate in a

college classroom situation to subject the faith of the Mormons to the test of reasonableness and morality.

But if a teacher does criticize fundamentalism, the Mormon position on Negroes, or anything else belonging to any religion, he is assuming the responsibility to exercise the same critical methods on all religions, including his own and that of his students. To criticize one's neighbors but bar one's own home to criticism is not only unfair but is intellectually damaging. The teacher who does this is implicitly teaching students not to be critically reflective about their own beliefs, to accept those beliefs as they are, to refuse to take personal responsibility for the potential consequences of those beliefs. The special exemption given to the students' faith teaches that lesson, whether the instructor intends that or not.

Perhaps it would be better, then, never to criticize any religious beliefs. Perhaps a teacher may ask that all critical stands on religion be excluded from the classroom and left to the private discussions and decisions of the students. This choice can be justified. But there are also compelling reasons for the opposite approach, reasons that would suggest it is quite important for a teacher, if he so chooses to subject all religious ideas, including his own and those of his students, to careful analysis and criticism, to let reason sit in judgment upon faith.

4. *The Insecurity of Faith*

The history of Christianity provides justification for reason to judge faith. It was in the name of Christ that the Crusaders went forth, consecrating violence as a tool of religion. It was in the name of Christ that so-called secret heretics were burned at the stake. It was in the name of Christ that for thirty years armies marched across what is now Germany, ravaging the land. Given the times and the political realities, perhaps nothing could have prevented all this. But from today's viewpoint it would seem to have been a mistake that these things were done in the name of Christ, that the faith of Christians supported such violence.

Small evils as well as great have been done in the name of faith. Is it good or harmful to have children go to confession, be told of mortal sin and be threatened with hell? It is not so long since one could hear a Catholic theologian saying that, no matter what the general psychological effect of confession upon children, they ought to confess in order to receive the special grace of the sacrament. The faith of many Catholic pastors told those pastors, at least in their own minds, that it was better to leave the plight of the black man unmentioned at mass lest the anger of the parishioners drive them away from the sacraments which insured their salvation. At present it is at least an open question whether or not many Catholic couples have been unnecessarily put into a destructive dilemma about artificial contraceptives.

With hindsight one may always argue that past mistakes were not the true faith, that the faith produces good and not evil. This is a good argument. In fact it is the best argument that a man must sit in judgment upon his own faith, must test it to see whether it produces good or evil, must try to use his reason and his moral concern. For what is

true faith? How does one discern that which really keeps man in contact with the mystery of godliness? Among all the prejudices and pettiness disguised as faith, which are the beliefs and attitudes that are good?

Reason and moral sensitivity alone seem to be available to man to serve as his tools of discernment for judging his own faith. They are not perfect tools. Man's reason and moral sense are notoriously weak. Man would be far more fortunate had he greater clarity of mind and conscience. He would, as an alternative, be fortunate had he some certain, guaranteed source of intellectual and moral guidance.

Of course, it is faith that many religions offer as an answer to man's uncertainty. Where reason fails, faith is offered. When man's conscience is clouded, religious authority makes its claims. But this simply brings the problem full circle.

Shall the faith and authority offered go unquestioned, unanalyzed, unjudged? Shall a man at this point abandon his responsibility to do his best to understand and then to pass rational and moral judgment? To ask the question this way, of course, prejudices the conclusion. The obvious answer is that a man must take responsibility for his own beliefs and moral judgments. But the question cannot go unasked. The problem of responsibility cannot be dismissed because it is too awkward, too troublesome. To do so would itself be irresponsible.

But the whole notion of responsibility can be brought into question by the idea of faith. For a man who believes that God has given man a specific revelation of Himself in scripture and, perhaps, also in a Spirit-guided tradition, the highest form of responsibility might seem to be obedience — to scripture and Christian tradition. The Catholic especially may define final responsibility as obedience to the authoritative voice of bishops and pope.

Theological grounds have been developed to support this kind of position. Faith is defined as a gift of God. To sit in judgment on faith is to sit in judgment not on man's work but on God's grace. Further, it is said, the Spirit is operating to help faltering man, giving guidance. To judge the faith handed down and developed through long centuries is to judge the work of the Holy Spirit. It might seem then the height of irresponsibility for a Christian to argue that his poor reason and faltering moral sense must nonetheless be kept ready to judge, to criticize, even to reject what God's grace and the Holy Spirit have provided.

But, in fact, to invoke God, the Spirit, faith, scripture, tradition, only points up the severity of the problem of responsibility. There are a variety of ways to make this clear.

Past mistakes of Christians can be listed again. The difficulty of interpreting scripture can be mentioned. It would be relevant to make clear that whatever man knows, believes, possesses, or has as an effect upon himself is finite, less than absolute or ultimate, and therefore subject to distortion of misunderstanding. There are also men of intelligence and moral concern who stand before Christians and ask them to show that belief in Christianity is not based on illusion.

All of these problems and others could be discussed at length. Each one can reveal part of the doubt that belongs to faith, can reveal how responsibility does not end with

obedience or blind faith. But for the sake of brevity there is a more striking, albeit somewhat fantastic, way of illuminating the extent of man's responsibility. That is to imagine a man face-to-face with a god.

The word "god" with a small "g" is necessary here. For simply by definition of what the word God stands for man's senses and mind cannot perceive it. There might be a burning bush, a blinding light, or an awesome vision before a man. There might be extraordinary events and mind-tearing perceptions. But all such things in the end are all on a scale that finite man can perceive or grasp.

Let this fantasy, however, about a man meeting god be extended to include whatever kind of evidence, persuasion, insight a man might need to be completely convinced he is standing before god or, even, before God. This man will have to judge that god, decide to accept or reject him, obey or disobey. A man cannot abandon his own power to think and to choose. To remain human he must remain responsible. Whether he is faced with such imaginary awesomeness as has been described here or with the everyday facts of religious beliefs, the responsibility for his own choices and actions remains with him. To alienate that responsibility from himself is the final and greatest of all irresponsibilities.

It is worth saying once more that this is not a position of arrogance or pride. It is not a claim that there is no blindness and weakness in man's heart and mind, that there is no such thing as original sin. It is simply to say that man has no alternative. He must either be willing to judge his God, his faith — everything. Or he must flee from his own humanness, from the freedom and responsibility that make him a man.

Christian ideas may be called upon to support this. Christian tradition has reacted against a total pietism, as it may be called, which attempts to abandon the burden of freedom by ceasing to choose. And the great Judaeo-Christian law of love can be the final guide, for a Christian or for any man whose reason and moral concern lead him thus. Love of God demands no love for idols, but for the final goodness Christians claim God to be. Whatever is not good, to that extent cannot be of this God. Love of neighbor demands that all ideas, beliefs, actions, realities be put to the test — is this what love demands? This is true even of religious ideas. The Sabbath was made for man.

Such dramatic conflicts of conscience as pictured above, however, are not the stuff an ordinary life is made of. Dramatic images serve to portray the depth of human responsibility. But potential conflicts between responsibility and one's faith in real life are simpler things most often. A man may move from day to day with a certain confidence in a Christianity that has survived and been developed through generations of moral choices by moral men. Christians may see Christ through the distortions of their own minds and hearts, but the image is still there, and it is a godly one.

Yet the distortions remain; questions arise. Today it is war and racism and hunger that call to men's souls to see whether their faith is adequate. Tomorrow there will be other challenges. A christian then should be prepared to think and to choose, to be responsible, even if this means he may find it necessary to confront his own faith with the question: is this faith helping or hurting, relevant or irrelevant, alive or dead? Faith remains in the end as insecure as man himself.

5. *An Education for Responsibility*

The humane education a college may offer is important as a special opportunity for students to consider at length, with a certain amount of calm and objectivity, under conditions where special resources are available, those questions which go beyond the problems of the moment. Those topics which are both delicate and complex can be chewed over and digested in peace for the deeper moral health of the student and the society he belongs to.

A university sometimes has to fight for this privilege. A philosopher or economist who spoke too strongly in favor of some Marxist ideas would once have caused a university some trouble. The same could be true of a theology teacher who speaks of religious ideas as something to be critically analyzed and to be subjected to judgment by reason and moral sense. But it is, of course, precisely because there can be pressures against considering awkward questions that the so-called spirit of free inquiry is one of the university's most valuable gifts to society.

This spirit of inquiry is kept alive as long as there are not locked chambers where reason may not intrude. Responsibility depends upon inquiry. Responsibility says: "I must know so that I may judge; there is no part of life where responsibility can vacation." For the sake of a sense of full responsibility, even the most basic questions of faith must be open to criticism in the college classroom. And if the teacher and students should be discussing their own faith, then for the sake of the integrity and humaneness of that faith there is reason to subject it fully to man's poor power, but sole claim to humanness — his ability to think, to choose, to be responsible.

