

## Foreword

If Kenneth Kirk's work is still studied with a keen interest almost forty years after his death, it is not only because of his stature as a theologian. It is also because he anticipated in his studies this new age that has dawned, in which theologians search traditions other than their own with serious interest. Without question the outstanding moralist of the modern Church of England, he drew extensively on all the traditions of Western Christianity, but was not ignorant of those of the East. He won instant recognition from Henri Bremond, an acknowledged European master of the literature of the spiritual life, and through him entered into living communication with the then more distant Catholic Church. Kirk is now a focus of interest in many traditions, in Europe and America, and especially among Roman Catholic moral theologians. The Vision of God was his crowning scholarly achievement.

The work originated in the Bampton Lectures for 1928, and was first published in March 1931. A second edition, very slightly revised, followed in June 1932, and this was reprinted in March 1937 and July 1941. The lectures were considerably amplified and furnished with exhaustive footnotes and no less than twenty Additional Notes at the end. In 1934 Kirk published what was called an Abridged Edition, but which was, as he explained in his Preface to it, closer to the text of the lectures as originally delivered. A close comparison of the two texts shows how skilfully the expansion and recontraction had been done.

In 1966 a new impression of the Abridged Edition was published, without Kirk's Preface, but with a Foreword by his son-in-law and biographer, Dr E.W. Kemp (afterwards Bishop of Chichester). In this, Dr Kemp sketched the development of Kirk's thought in his earlier works, notably *Some Principles of Moral Theology and their Application* (1920), *Ignorance, Faith and Conformity* (1925), and *Conscience and its Problems* (1927). For a full study of Kirk's work, therefore, the reader should be referred to these, and to the numerous smaller books listed by Dr Kemp in his *Life and Letters of K.E. Kirk Bishop of Oxford* (1959). As Bishop, Kirk addressed his diocese, and more particularly his clergy, in his monthly article in *The Oxford Diocesan Magazine*. The best of these were collected by Dr Kemp for publication in *Beauty and Bands and other papers* (1955). They exemplify the unity which Kirk achieved in his life as scholar, theologian, moralist, pastor and administrator of a diocese incorporating three large English counties as well as two universities.

The text of the present edition is that of Kirk's Abridged Edition of 1934, complete with his own Preface. It can be read and enjoyed as a literary unity by those who have not read, and may never read, the fuller text. Specialists will find much of the material omitted treated more fully by other authors - for scholarship has not stood still in the years since 1928. But they will still turn to the full text to see how Kirk developed his themes in their amplitude, and to his notes and excursions to see how he built them up from exact particulars. His descriptions of 'rigorism' and 'humanism', for instance, in a footnote on p. 7<sup>1</sup> are a model of clarity. In the section on Pagan Anticipations of the Vision of God, there is a summary, richly illustrated by quotation, of the Hermetic Books (pp. 46-54), omitted in the abridgement. From his treatment of the New Testament there are omitted short studies of 'the double standard' in

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1. Page references are to the 1941 impression of the 2nd edition of 1932.

St Matthew (p. 69 n), of St Paul (in contrast to St James) on private wealth (p. 74f) and on slavery and marriage (pp. 79f, 109f), and of elements in the New Testament tradition hostile to marriage itself (p. 75). We miss the reminder of the consequences to the emerging Christian moral tradition of the breach with Jewry (p. 118) and of the baneful effects of rhetoric on theology and ethics (p. 130). Among the more extensive omissions are the sections on Discipline in the New Testament and in the early Roman Church (pp. 146-73), on the Reform of Penance (pp. 275-301) and on the Question of Private Absolution in the Early Church (Note O: pp. 534-40). (On this last subject, Kirk's own conclusions were confirmed and amplified by R.C. Mortimer, later Bishop of Exeter, in *The Origin of Private Penance in the West* [1939].) The reduction of the narratives of St Augustine (p. 319f) and St Bernard (p. 346f), though aesthetically as severe a loss as any in the book, can be made good from more extensive sources. It would take long searching, however, to replace his compressed treatment of discipline in the Protestant and Reformed Churches and of what happened to professions of Christian liberty when ground between the millstones of church and civil magistracy in the new order (pp. 421-30).

Kirk wrote for his own generation, yet often, when read now, he seems also to have written unwittingly for ours. *The Vision of God* asserts, over all other human activity, the primacy of worship, man's adoring response to God for what God is, has done and does. When this is forgotten, moral theology suffers and ecclesiastical discipline wavers in purpose as in act. This was Kirk's experience and conclusion from the evidence; it is confirmed in experience today. In the Roman Catholic Church there is a quest for a new method, language and style of moral theology, more reflective of the theology of the Second Vatican Council, and more pliant to contemporary philosophical, psychological and sociological understandings of man. Kirk was pointing in that direction while few of his contemporaries even looked

towards it. In other Churches, the study of 'Christian ethics' must learn to ground itself in something firmer than problem-solving or utilitarian or 'agapeistic' calculus. It must be fed from a tradition, philosophical and theological, or it will be useless in relation to those other disciplines, as of medical or political or social science, alongside which it is now exercised. Kirk's warnings may still be heard, as he himself was among the first to look at psychology and psychiatry as aids to moral understanding and pastoral care. 'Lecture III', he wrote in his Preface, contrasted with the central Christian doctrine 'the attempt to substitute moralism for religion by throwing the weight of emphasis upon the promulgation and enforcement of codes of Christian behaviour' (p. ix) - a warning, not only to the ecclesiastical codifier, but also to those who, like the present writer, extol the values of conventions and professional codes of practice as ethical sinews in civil society.

Writing for his own generation, and largely for his own Church of England, then newly conscious of its Church Assembly as an organ not only of government but also (as Kirk hoped) of moral demand and discipline, he wrote words that are not altogether inept now for that Church, or for the Church of Rome seized with the problems of authority raised by the encyclical *Humanae Vitae*: 'This then is the first variant of the general problem of *corporate discipline*, or *institutionalism*. It opens up a whole series of subordinate but important questions. What demands shall the Church make upon her members, either saintly or pagan respectively, or both saintly and pagan together, and by what methods shall she attempt to secure conformity to her demands with the minimum of friction and loss? Again, what is she to do if one of her ministers or members refuses to comply with her demands; or if the principles of conduct which, in all good faith, he chooses for himself and commends to others contradict those which she has evolved in her own experience, or believes herself to hold as of divine institution? Is he to be left to go his own way, and to lead others with him? Or

is the Church to bring pressure to bear on him, and if so, at what point and in what measure?’ (p. 4)

Despite the rooting of common worship in the annual cycle commemorating the saving events of the Gospel, each generation tends to emphasise what it will of those events and to neglect what it does not like. Kirk saw this then: ‘In England, so much stress has been laid on the Incarnation, as sanctifying all the common things of life, that the Cross, in which they are all renounced, was in danger of being forgotten.’ (p. 55) He saw also the danger of a retreat to a pagan persuading of the gods to perform tasks intractable to men in the ungoverned practice of ‘practical’ or intercessory prayer. ‘Intercession and petition, valid, necessary and excellent though they are if they take their place within the atmosphere of worship and communion with God, become frankly pagan or magical if the element of communion is belittled, ignored or relegated to the background.’ (p. 438) He would not have lessened the force of either warning today, were he to visit churches exuberating in a common liturgical effervescence in which the Cross can be too easily submerged beneath a celebration of supportive solidarity, and in which intercession, even in a eucharistic context, can degenerate into a mere recital of ills listed from far and near, an *agenda* for God culled from the newspaper or the latest radio or television bulletin.

These considerations are not alien to the study of moral theology; they are part of it. For Christian worship, prayer and intercession, Christian teaching and reflection, Christian living and a discipline, corporate and personal, proper to the Christian life are inseparable parts of one whole, dependent upon the truth of the Gospel to which they are a response. This is the conviction which underlies *The Vision of God*, and which erupts from time to time in lapidary phrase. Such a one occurs unobtrusively in the opening sentences of a passage on St Irenaeus, in which Kirk described the subject matter of Christian ethics as ‘the nature and implications of that vision of God which the testimony of centuries

proclaims to be the goal of human life.' (p. 312) Whether a return to the writings of Kenneth Kirk springs from a new awareness of that truth or is itself prompting it is of little account; what matters is that the study and teaching of moral theology be grounded in it.

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