Outline for ethics: a response to Oliver O’Donovan

Stephen N Williams

We welcome this article by the Professor of Theology at the United Theological College in Aberystwyth in Wales, in which he describes and responds to an important new book on ethics.

A. Resurrection and Moral Order
Most of us probably insist that theology and ethics should go together. One has to do with reflection that is barren without action; the other has to do with action that is aimless without reflection. Yet if we compare the phrases ‘evangelical theology’ and ‘evangelical ethics’, the first sounds a lot more familiar than the second, though ‘evangelical social ethics’ is coming increasingly into popular currency. Recently, however, a work has appeared titled Resurrection and Moral Order and subtitled An Outline for Evangelical Ethics which has had very high acclaim and even been tipped for classical status. Its author (Professor Oliver O’Donovan) commands our gratitude and its substance commands our attention. So we will look in this article at some of the central theses of the book. Yet we need to be critical as well as appreciative.

Two preliminary warnings are in order. (1) This work is an outline for not an outline of evangelical ethics. If it were an outline of evangelical ethics, we might expect to find a treatment of such standard themes as government, labour and marriage. But we do not get this. This outline for ethics sets out for us the theological shape our thinking must take as we approach anything in ethics. Theological principles, not ethical particulars, are the focus. (2) What we have is an outline not an introduction. That is, the author is not introducing beginners to the field but giving a survey of the field to those digging away in it. Karl Barth admitted that one might get the gist of his thought in the massive Church Dogmatics by skipping the small print! The same might be possible with this work, yet I suspect it would be hard for those without some background in moral theology and philosophy. Let us set out its concerns in six main theses.

1. Christian realism
It was Walter Lippmann back in 1929 who spread talk of ‘scientific humanism’ — a project designed to encourage science and morality to shrug off the shackles of religion. What has befallen science and morality in a culture progressively dispensing with religion, as it seems? In practice, very often, people have ended up by imposing on the world a coherent structure for life and thought, but such a structure does not objectively inhere in the world — our science and morality do not conform to the way the world really is. Perhaps the natural order cannot be known to us and perhaps there is no objective moral order. Professor O’Donovan wants to combat this latter view. ‘Realism’ can mean a lot of different things, but here it means belief that the structures within which God has placed us, within which we think and act, including the structure of our being as humans, are given and objective; through the gospel we get an intellectual grip on reality. And what O’Donovan does for realism in the moral order may be compared with Professor Thomas Torrance’s parallel enterprise with regard to the natural, scientific order.

2. Christ’s resurrection
‘We shall argue for the theological proposition that Christian ethics depends upon the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead’ (p. 13). Why? Because resurrection ‘tells us of God’s vindication of his creation and so of our created life’ (ibid.). Resurrection is God’s affirmation of human dignity for it reverses Adam’s decision to die; it affirms the order in which mankind is placed at the same time for it points creation to its fulfilment in the eschaton. The resurrection announces the origin and destiny of the world as a God-given unity; the eschatological destiny will do more than just restore the created order, but it will not abolish it either. Resurrection is a transforming power. We are not adrift in this world (for the humanity created by God is vindicated in history) nor lost in the next (for the humanity vindicated in history is destined for full redemption). Creation shares the fate of mankind. On this axis of God’s creative and redemptive activity we are solidly established in our humanity within an objective realm.

3. The will submitted to the understanding
What will this mean for Christian ethics? Over the centuries there have been different ways of looking at morality. But often schemes of thinking have not been hooked up to the objective reality which should be forming our thinking. Creation-resurrection-eschaton gives us the objective framework for moral endeavour. But how does that help us as we confront actual moral issues, as opposed to just theoretically contemplating ethics? Moral issues as we face them can frighten us in one of two ways. Either they seem completely novel (witness the field of embryology and ethics) or they seem incorrigibly perplexing (witness our efforts at times to figure out the obligations of friendship). Now O’Donovan is constantly anxious to avoid an easy route through given moral perplexities. But he insists that they confront us within a divinely given order. Morality is not some chaotic cross-country course where we finally abandon the attempt to make objective sense of things. The combination of things that turn up in a certain issue, as we try to weigh them up, may seem daunting. But we must persist in the attempt to gain objective moral understanding.

For what is the alternative? An alternative often taken by us in our particular dilemmas and taken by many ethical theorists, past and present: voluntarism. Like ‘realism’, this is a word with varied meanings. Supposing, however, we think of our actions as generated by our understanding or intellect, on the one hand, and by our will on the other. When we get sceptical in principle or in practice about moral objectivity, we tend to emphasize the will — we impose on our deeds the stamp of our will, not the stamp of an objective under-
standing. That is an important aspect of ‘voluntarism’. It is consistently the target of O'Donovan's attack, though he is typically fair and sensitive to its claims.

4. The understanding submitted to Christ
Having given such weight to understanding, have we now succumbed to something called ‘rationalism’, which accords the human mind powers of tremendous scope in grasping the world and our place and work within it? Not really. The reason we emphasize understanding is that there is an objective something to understand—an ontological basis for morality (ontology pertains to that which is). When we ask about the source of our understanding, we are coming round to the epistemological question (epistemology pertains to that which we know or believe). And here O'Donovan emphasizes not human reason without Christ but divine revelation in Christ. The gospel is our source and the author's engagement with this question explicitly invites comparison with the work of Tom Torrance. What we know we know from, in and through Jesus Christ and through the Spirit. The Spirit conforms us to that reality vindicated in Christ. If the will must be shaped by understanding it is only as the understanding is shaped by the gospel of Christ.

5. Free in Christ
Now that we have talked of an objective order encompassing us, an objective Word directed to us, and a Spirit poised to empower us, are we on course for a life of moral freedom? The author devotes much space to the question of freedom in the second part of the book: its first part dealt with objective reality; its second deals with subjective reality. In the context of the last two centuries of moral philosophy, discussion of freedom is important, and I digress here for a moment from O'Donovan's particular discussion. The concept of freedom has fallen on hard times in much recent philosophy, particularly the area known as philosophy of mind, which has close links with moral philosophy. But it is not relevant to pursue here this largely secular debate about the relation of freedom and determinism. On the other hand, the notion that to be a moral agent entails either freedom or autonomy (which is not quite the same) has played a particularly important part in moral thought since at least Immanuel Kant at the end of the eighteenth century. Kant himself could associate freedom and moral agency with belief in God. But his whole way of throwing weight on the moral agent induced some later thinkers to follow a path to a different conclusion. Not only could it be concluded that you can account for moral agency without reference to God, but you could even think that God, or rather the idea of God, actually threatens moral agency. For does not the spring of morality reside in our freedom, and does not the presence of a God presiding over the moral order guarantee that what he has to say now becomes the law of our action, so destroying our freedom?

O'Donovan's thesis at this point is fairly straightforward. Human freedom is freedom to be human, not to be something else; it is thus freedom to indwell an order that cannot threaten it, for it is in this very context that we are human at all. Nor is the Spirit's agency a threat to freedom; on the contrary, only through God the Spirit is a free response possible. Freedom is real, but its reality is established by the Spirit. This general theme is developed by the author in relation to authority, especially the authority of Christ, and in relation to the church thought of not as an authority, primarily, within which we enquire about our freedom but as itself an agent summoned to freedom.

6. Love: the bond of deeds and character
We are confronted by a moral order which has many features and strive for a variety of moral virtues in order to live within it. What unifies our outward deeds and inward character? The answer is love. This is what shapes the moral life. There is ultimately no tension between the requirements of love of God and neighbour for the simple reason that there is an order whose author is God, whose inhabitants are alike in their kind (equal in humanity) and one in destiny (we are meant for God). So our outward activity can be unified. But there is a disposition or (not quite the same) character to be formed in an integrated way too and this again is the domain of love. Love does not flourish in splendidly romantic isolation, destined to flower for a season in this world with no further consequences. The ultimate reward of love is the fulfilment of life in eternity and transformation beyond the world when by justifying grace the fragments of the life of love are gathered together in intelligible unity. So the incentive to love which the author provides is no mere incentive to persevere but also to lay hold of what is eternal, its majestic order framing time and destined to redeem it.

B. Towards a response
While in what follows I wish to question certain aspects of this analysis, it is appropriate to mention first three major strengths of the book. First, our outline completely veils the fact that O'Donovan's work is executed with an extraordinary fecundity in a whole range of disciplines: biblical exegesis, historical assessment, philosophical analysis. Taste and see. One accumulates enormous debts to the author on a host of issues in the course of the book and although some of the discussions seem at first sight to take on a life of their own in the second and final parts of the book, independent of the main thesis, this is not really so. Cue phrases like 'created order' or 'moral realities', for example, should keep us alert to that. Secondly, it is pervaded by that spirit which dignifies all intellectual endeavour, the spirit that communicates a sense of the greatness of God and majesty of his ways. To keep up the comparison, be it remembered that when Torrance prefaced Theological Science he wrote: 'If I may be allowed to speak personally for a moment, I find the presence and being of God bearing upon my experience and thought so powerfully that I cannot but be convinced of His overwhelming reality and rationality'. (p. ix). Whatever our response to his work, this sense is certainly communicated consistently in the whole of it and so it is in this one by O'Donovan.

Kierkegaard, in a piece to which O'Donovan refers, closes a chapter with the words: 'The reward of the good man is to be allowed to worship in truth'. When we remember that latreia in Romans 12:1 can appear as 'service' as well as 'worship' in an English rendering then we get a hint of the ethos of this work. But last and not least, the substantial contention that man and creation form an interlocking order affirmed by God in the gospel, open to our participation in the Spirit, leading to the formation of life by love is surely correct in its principle. If we now focus on difficulties it must be framed by these considerations. I shall focus on two, the
first with seemingly small beginnings, the second com-
ounding an implicit difficulty suggested by the first.

1. Difficulties with ‘transformation’ of natural structures in
1 Peter and the NT
The great key texts and theological principles taken by the
author to establish the connection between resurrection and
ethics are understandably Pauline ones. But much interest
attaches to two significant references to the first Petrine
epistle in Part One of the work. The first follows the
announcement that resurrection is theologically central for
ethics since it ‘tells us of God’s vindication of his creation,
and so of our created life. Just so does 1 Peter, the most
consistently theological New Testament treatise on ethics,
begin by proclaiming the reality of the new life upon which
the very possibility of ethics depends: “By his great mercy we
have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrec-
tion of Jesus Christ from the dead” (1:3) (p. 13). The second
brings to its conclusion the claim that ‘Christian ethics, like
the resurrection, looks both backwards and forwards, to the
origin and to the end of the created order. It respects the
natural structures of life in the world, while looking forward
to their transformation’ (p. 58). This is instanced in 1 Peter
which opens with a declaration of hope and moves on to such
things as ethics of government, labour and marriage.
O’Donovan avers that ‘a hope which envisages the transfor-
mation of existing natural structures cannot consistently
attack or repudiate those structures’, though the institutions
need redemption. I start with this second claim and move on
to the first.

It is surely wrong to say that Peter’s letter exemplifies a
hope which envisages the transformation of natural struc-
tures, and the consequences of this for O’Donovan’s thesis
are by no means trivial. We need here to pause over two
words: ‘hope’ and ‘transformation’. ‘Hope’ (elpis) is a word
thoroughly at home in this epistle; it crops up in some form
five times.13 It has been taken to designate the orientation
of Christian life in contrast to Pauline ‘faith’ and the epistle
has been said to show ‘more compellingly than almost any other
New Testament writing what strong moral stimulus hope
gives’.14 Now elpis can be used in the NT in the sense typical
of our ordinary discourse, where it expresses a wish which
may or may not be fulfilled; so Paul, not knowing his
destination, hoped to visit Timothy (1 Tim. 3:14) and Felix,
not knowing his man, hoped that Paul would offer him a
bribe (Acts 24:26). But this is not the triumphant hope
announced in 1 Peter — this is what we may term ‘hope’ in a
distinctively theological sense, member of the triumvirate
‘faith, hope and love’, whose object is what is promised or
sure, not just possible, and which summons us to a corres-
pondingly confident disposition.15 The question is then
whether that kind of hope encompasses the transformation
of natural structures or redemption of institutions.

So what of ‘transformation’? O’Donovan introduces this
idea when he is concerned with divine redemption for the
whole of creation. Creation as a whole must fulfil a God-given
purpose. Romans 8 is the locus classicus but of course not the
only locus of this teaching. And ‘this fulfilment is what is
implied when we speak of the “transformation” of the created
order’ (p. 55). ‘... We must understand “creation” not merely
as the raw material out of which the world as we know it is
composed, but as the order and coherence in which it is
composed’ (p. 31). ‘Creation is the given totality of order
which forms the presupposition of historical existence.
“Created order” is that which neither the terrors of chance
nor the ingenuity of art can overthrow’ (p. 61). The ramifica-
tions of this are central in the book, of course, and the
relation of creation to eschatological transformation is
explored in particular in chapter 3. Now the natural structures
of life in this world are explicitly part of that created order that
will be transformed — that is why these comments on 1 Peter
are integrated into the conclusion of this portion of the
author’s exposition. And later we have a more specific
allusion to the transformation of marriage (p. 70f.), one of the
three specific institutions discussed in Peter’s epistle.

However, there is surely no sign that this epistle exhibits
any hope for the transformation of natural structures. It is
true that Christian hope, embedded in the heart and
governing behaviour, may, with faith and love, issue in
conduct that could transform these structures.16 But neither
hope nor resurrection carries implications of eschatological
transformation. ‘Transformation’ for O’Donovan stands as
the alternative to, e.g., abolition. Supposing one asked on
the basis of this epistle whether natural structures or institutions
were destined for eschatological transformation or eschato-
logical abolition. Even after investigating the Jewish
background of the epistle to find out whether Petrine hope is
really as otherworldly as it sounds, it would appear difficult
to establish a definite answer. The fact is that nothing at all in
Petrine ethics hangs on whether natural institutions are to be
abolished or transformed and nothing in its resurrection hope
shapes its ethics with even implicit reference to that matter.
But let us enquire more generally about abolition and trans-
formation and thus work our way out of a narrow
concentration on this epistle.

With particular vim in the seventeenth century Lutherans
and Calvinists contested the relation of the world to come to the
world that is: are we to think of discontinuity or of
continuity? The impact of that question has sometimes been
deemed important for its ethical consequences, not only in
conservative but apparently outside those circles.17 “Conti-
nuists” have even got down to the nitty-gritty of what may
continue.18 Now the debate, if entered on its own terms,
forces one to think about what it means to take creation as a
whole, a totality, in its eschatological destiny. O’Donovan is
clearly right that Scripture does so speak. What Scripture
does not tell us, however, is what such wholeness entails. For
its purposes it does not need to. But when this is linked up
with discussions of ethics, including those pertaining to
natural institutions, one is forced to enquire in more detail.

O’Donovan consistently refers to the eschatological
destiny of humanity or of mankind, treating humanity as a
whole, and yet he appears to reject universal salvation. So the
‘humanity’ to whom a glorious destiny is promised is not one
with the sum total of all individuals. On the meaning of
redemption for non-human creation he professes agnosti-
cism, but obviously when one considers botanical or
zoological natural history, again sum total can scarcely be in
mind. ‘Natural structures’ or ‘institutions’ are not the same as
people or biological organisms. What could it mean to say
they are destined for transformation by virtue of their
participation in a larger whole? One thinks of legal structures,
generically a feature of political society as God would have it
in this world, vital for the promotion of justice, itself a central
bibilical theme. It is only at a stratospheric level of generalization that one could insist that we must term what happens to them transformation rather than abolition. And one then wonders what mileage is to be got out of insisting on the transformation of Petrine natural structures, though one should perhaps take them one by one. The point is this: the claim that there is a wholeness to creation, destined for transformation, is manifestly compatible with the claim that ordered features of our natural structures — indeed, the structures themselves — will simply disappear. But O'Donovan's motive for retaining 'transformation' language then becomes the highly generalized one of preserving whatever Scripture means us to preserve when speaking of fulfilment in the eschaton. However — and it is to this point I am leading — we are summoned to live lives on this earth and order our ethical life on it in relation to a host of things that may simply, like heaven and earth, 'pass away'. How, then, does a conviction that there is a whole to be redeemed affect our ethics within structures or institutions of which we may as well surmise that they will be abolished, as transformed, if we allow the language of redemption to apply to them at all?

Is this a semantic quibble? Not, it would seem, for O'Donovan. If we refuse to speak of the transformation of natural structures we lapse into gnosticism, by his account. Does, then, insistence on transformation actually affect the shape of the moral life? However we answer that question, it has interesting consequences for the way we respond to the thesis of the book. Careful attention to the two closing chapters of the book, where the relation of love to transformation comes in for consideration, seems to show that what one holds about structures or institutions makes little difference here. That is, one might love in the way and for the end commendably outlined here, while merrily plumping for the abolition of structures in the way indicated and taking the line that what the NT says about the fulfilling transformation of the whole actually has little obvious bearing on our attitudes to natural institutions. If this is so, the relation of the kind of outline of ethics proffered in this book to concrete ethics is put into question. But if, indeed, we must say that the shape of moral life is affected by an insistence on transformation that embraces institutions, then Christian ethics is surely hostage to what will turn out to be a rather detailed discussion of eschatology that surely does not merit a role of such influence on ethics. In sum, then, it is not clear that Peter or the NT generally envisages the transformation of natural structures; not clear that it matters; not clear how transformation of a whole bears on this.

While accusations of unclarity can often be rather cheap, I think it is fair to raise the question here simply because it brings in the relation of the principles outlined in this book for ethics to the actual ethical convictions we struggle for within natural structures. And in a very different way, this question arises too from the second point I wish to make, the one that takes us back to O'Donovan's first and general reference to 1 Peter. To this, then, we now turn.

2. Crucifixion-resurrection instead of creation-resurrection

It will be recalled that the author described 1 Peter as the most consistently theological NT treatise of ethics. The epistle is marked by an emphasis on suffering. Not everything talked about as 'suffering' is of the same kind, but various sufferings are connected. In one sense, suffering is a contingency a regards ethical conduct in natural structures — only in the sphere of labour (of the three singled out by O'Donovan) — suffering explicitly mentioned. But it is also true that in the Christian faith it is the path to glory is through suffering essentially not contingently. And that life is shaped by the life of another who took such a path: the resurrection of Christ was the resurrection of the one who trod it and is viewed in Peter's epistle in closest connection with the cross (1:3-21; 3:18-22). O'Donovan from the start makes clear that cross and resurrection cannot be detached from each other more than from the incarnation or life of Christ for purposes of ethics. Still, both the explicit and the underlying connection of the resurrection with ethics in Peter's letter compels a different set of reflections from those offered by O'Donovan because however one comes at it, the integration of hope and suffering, born of life under the risen Lordship of one crucified, is starkly central. The meaning of the resurrection here for ethics is as much to do with bearing the cross as with vindicating creation. Now what do we imply by this?

In contemporary theology, Moltmann has been especially conspicuous in pursuing a path of reflection which makes cross and resurrection, set in an eschatological context foundational for Christian ethics. The most consistent ethical point of all his work is the call to alignment with th disadvantaged and oppressed. Resurrection cannot under gird ethics except in systematic connection with the cross a well as eschaton and Moltmann seeks to base this on Paul more than on any NT author. Now one might agree or disagree with Moltmann theologically. But resurrection seems to shape Christian ethics differently (though not necessarily incompatibly at all) in Peter, Moltmann and O'Donovan. And this prompts me to ask more closely (and far to summaily, I am afraid) about O'Donovan's broad endeavou in this work.

In this work, is the author answering the question: who does the resurrection mean for Christian ethics? Or is it rather: out of what does Christian ethics spring? If the former it is open to the rejoinder that the meaning of the resurrection for Christian ethics lies as much in its connection with the cross in a suffering church and a suffering world, as it does in its connection with the vindication of created order. But he really answering the second question, in which case there is preconceived idea of what kind of thing Christian ethics is. But the importance of the link between resurrection and created order is one established by the particular perspectiv with which one approaches the discipline. Resurrection does vindicate it, it may be, and Christian ethics may be shaped b this. But is there something explicit or implicit in biblical theology and ethics that must make the vindication creation something of primary importance to ethics or mark the vindication of creation the primary ethical import of th resurrection? If one asks: what kind of ethics spring from th gospel? we could answer: one that bids us take up our cross and carry it as we mortify the flesh in the power of the resurrection. That the resurrection should enable us to do so in a world of suffering could then constitute our defence of as a starting-point. But the outline for such an ethics would look very different.

We are edging here towards the concerns of liberation theologians. One need not take up a position with regard t
them to anticipate the shape of their response to such a work as this.26 The moral agent O'Donovan has in mind scarcely needs to be told that he is man rather than swine (p. 87); the moral agent of concern to the liberationists frequently does.27 The social context of the issues treated in detail by O'Donovan has made it academically and institutionally possible to relax with the body while reflecting on a particular set of issues with the mind; the social context in which liberationists may reflect is one where grinding poverty and oppression constitute the objective context indwelt by the body and the mind will be appositely engaged. My point is not to endorse a trendy contextualization in sham empathy with those whose lot one does not share; nor, more important, to depict the author as a bourgeoisie man muffling over bourgeois issues! That would be culpably unjustified trivialization at almost any level. But one might in a different context agree on the theology of the resurrection; agree even to make it pivotal for ethics, but end off with a very different outline for ethics with equal claim to biblical footage and theological seriousness but geared to cross and suffering.28 To ask whether or not this amounts to a criticism of O'Donovan's work is not necessarily interesting. The point is that this is an outline for evangelical ethics from a certain perspective and in a certain context. If, in the light of my foregoing comments, it purports to be more than this, then we must simply say that the contention has not been proven.

In conjunction with the first point of comment, I have drifted here in the direction of questioning the relation of Professor O'Donovan's outline to concrete moral realities. Doubtless one could have a crack at an alternative outline; but anyone who tries it shortly after reading this book would have to possess the heart of a gazelle in the hide of a rhinoceros.29 Or one might argue for a greater fluidity and variability for the theological principles informing the shape of ethical reflection than the author allows, despite his concession to that possibility. But one had better not try anything unless one takes to heart and to life the truth expounded in O'Donovan's volume . . . and that will take most of us a long enough while.

1 The journal 'Transformation', launched in 1984, is billed as 'an international dialogue on evangelical social ethics'. IVP, 1986.


3 See the vast quantity of his literature especially from Theological Science (OUP, 1969) onwards.

4 Page references to O'Donovan's work will be given in the text.

5 I use 'ethical' and 'moral' in the way used by the author, but in some circles a sharp distinction is drawn between the 'religious' and the ethical/moral. On the advisability or otherwise of this I do not comment here.

6 See chapter 4. Much light is cast on the rest of issues concerning reason and revelation if one studies the impact of Anselm on Barth, helpfully introduced by Torrance himself in Karl Barth: an introduction to his early theology, 1910-1931 (SCM, 1962).

7 O'Donovan does not really pursue, however, what Torrance calls the 'epistemological relevance of the Spirit'; see his essay of that title in T. F. Torrance, God and rationality (London, 1971).


9 I am not concerned here with the strict historical question of Kant's own impact. In general, it is important to understand the whole eighteenth century climate in which Kant worked, including what went on in the French and English Enlightenments. Additionally, we must bear in mind that ideas about morality are not simply born of other people's ideas about morality; an intellectual

10 One might note here the radical theology of Don Cupitt, whose latest work, The Long-Legged Fly (SCM, 1987) still exhibits utter hostility to O'Donovan's type of approach; in philosophy, note the position advocated by James Rachels, whose views are swiftly summarised by Brian Davies, An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion (OUP, 1982).

11 These words are not cited by O'Donovan but are found in Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing (Harper, 1956), p. 67.

12 1, 3, 13, 21; 3:15 and indeed 3:5.


15 Just to cite the debate referred to in note 17 above, note Peter Kuzmic's essay, History and Eschatology: Evangelical Views in Nicholls, op. cit., p. 152, where he is himself drawing on others. Abraham Kuyper and two of his four successors in the Free University of Amsterdam (Bovinck and Berkouwer) have been broadly influential here.

16 I do not mean to press this synoptic text (Mt. 24:35 and parallels) into the service of any particular eschatology here.

17 Actually, I wish only to make a more modest claim, namely that O'Donovan does not show us in this book what bearing it has. In fact, however, perhaps what one holds about natural structures does affect the shape of moral life on the terms of the book; I suspect that the way to decide this would be to weigh what O'Donovan says about love and intelligibility against the implications of a remark made by Emil Brunner in his discussion of eschatology: "Whoever lives in the power of love asks no question about meaning because he possesses truth and puts it into effect" (Eternal Hope, Lutterworth, 1954, p. 85). But I shall not pursue this!

18 Of course, I have not touched on the rest of the NT and in fact it is as much Rev. 21:24-26 as anything Paul said that has occupied some here recent discussions. Without arguing the case, I just record my conviction here that the same would have to be said of the rest of the NT as may be said of 1 Pet. 1:1.

19 Sometimes the church is lined up for discussion alongside these three (D. Bonhoeffer, Ethics, Macmillan, 1965, pp. 207ff.), and so note 1 Pet. 3:8-12; however, it is precisely related to 3:14.

20 Moltmann is not an ethicist. Much in Bonhoeffer's Ethics, however, is suited to fruitful comparison with O'Donovan's work. In this connection, note the supreme fittingness with which Bonhoeffer's life concluded: the texts he read for the Sunday preceding his Monday execution were Is. 53:5 and 1 Pet. 1:3! (E

24 For Moltmann, see now R. Bauckham, Moltmann: Messianic Theology in the Making (Marshall Pickering, 1987).

25 Of course, it may be complained that Moltmann’s theology is ethically pretty vacuous; J. Gustafson, Theology and Ethics (University of Chicago, 1981, pp. 43ff). But the rights or wrongs of this contention do not affect the present point.

26 Not all liberation theologians should be bracketed together, of course, even the Latin American ones whose form of theology I have primarily in mind here.

27 ‘The Reformers . . . could proclaim bluntly “all have sinned” and never ask how incoherent, absurd or irrelevant that might sound to beings that view themselves as one more pig at the trough . . .’, T. Hanks, The Evangelical Witness to the Poor and Oppressed (TSF Bulletin, September-October 1986), p. 13. But Hanks is not criticizing the Reformers and in any case I am not adjudicating his argument. He ends his sentence, moreover, with considerations that bring him somewhat closer to O’Donovan’s concerns.

28 Again, the implication is not that the ethics of liberatio theology is essentially cross/resurrection ethics. It is at the least misleading, for instance, when this is claimed for Hugo Assmann Practical Theology of Liberation which appeared early in the ‘movement’. See the editorial remark in E. Hoskyns and N. Davey, Crucifixion-Resurrection: the pattern of the theology and ethics of the New Testament (SPCK, 1981), p. 366.

29 Buddhism is more systematically oriented to what is often translated ‘suffering’ (dukkha) than any other world religion, it would seem, and hence one muses a bit when one learns that it could be said of its early adherents that they had the hearts of gazelles, i.e. a light heartedness which for the rest of us would just be a highly suspect condition. The rhinoceros, as we know, will storm just about an citadel when the mood is on him.