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Book Review: The Cambridge Companion To Christian Ethics

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The Cambridge Companion to Christian Ethics, edited by Robin Gill. Cambridge University Press, 2001. Pp. xv and 290. Price \$59.95 (hardback) \$19.95 (paper).

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This book contains 18 essays on a wide range of topics. The contributors all teach in theology or religious studies departments. The book is divided into three sections: 1) "The Grounds of Christian Ethics" (four of the five essays in this section focus on issues of scriptural interpretation), 2) "Approaches to Christian Ethics" (the topics addressed include natural law, virtue ethics, gender and Christian ethics, liberation ethics, and comparisons of Christian ethics with the ethics of other faiths), and 3) "Issues in Christian Ethics Today" (the issues discussed include war, arms sales, social justice, ecology, business, the family, and medical ethics). The essays range from 11 to 21 pages in length. Most of the essays give general overviews of their topics and contain helpful bibliographical references.

1. *Essays in the First Section.* The essays by Gareth Jones, John Rogerson, Timothy Jackson, and Steven Barton deal with various questions about the scriptural basis of Christian ethics and questions of scriptural interpretation. Jones gives the most systematic discussion of questions of interpretation. The other authors focus on specific scriptures. Among the general issues discussed in these essays are the authority of the scriptures and the normative import of biblical narratives and injunctions for contemporary people in their very different circumstances. (When do commands from God or Christ apply to contemporary human beings in their circumstances, which are often very different from those of the people in the *Bible* to whom the commands were given?)

One of the most interesting features of the book is the way in which various authors try to deal with *Bible* passages in which actions that are approved of or commanded offend (sometimes deeply offend) our moral sensibilities. Rogerson discusses Joshua 6:21, one of several passages in the Old Testament in which God commands the killing of captured peoples or towns.¹ Jackson discusses Matthew 5:31 in which Jesus says "blasphemy against the holy spirit will not be forgiven." (Jackson's account of this passage is very interesting.) Of special interest, are the discussions of the "household rules" stated in Paul's Epistles. Barton discusses the following passage:

Wives be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them. Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord. Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged. Slaves, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters, not with eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but in singleness of heart, fearing the Lord... Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven (Col. 3:18-4:1 (RSV)).

Barton and Lisa Cahill wrestle with this and other similar passages. Barton

invokes Bultmann's idea of "demythologization" which allows "the deeper meanings behind the biblical mythology to come to expression." Cahill appeals to other passages in the New Testament which she thinks contradict this passage. These other passages include the following, written by Paul: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28). These arguments are plausible and largely successful. However, there is a danger that interpreters will simply defend their own moral views (formed independently of their religious commitments) and then try to reconcile those moral views to their religious beliefs and the scriptures as best they can. (Clearly, many Christians do precisely this. All manner of wrong and injustice have been defended in the name of Christian faith.) Christians must be open to the idea that their religious faith is a challenge to their moral beliefs and can be a source of moral guidance and correction. I would suggest that we ask whether it is possible to identify certain fundamental moral principles, e.g., "love one's neighbor as oneself" and the golden rule, as central to the Christian tradition. Perhaps morally offensive passages in the *Bible* can be reinterpreted and sometimes dismissed in virtue of conflicting with these fundamental moral principles.

The most disappointing feature of the book as whole is the limited attention it gives to the Christian concept of love/*agape* and the ethics of love. Jackson's paper is the only one that offers a detailed discussion of these matters. Rowan Williams proposes the following as a foundational principle for Christians to "decide what we are to do":

An ethic of the Body of Christ asks that we first examine how any proposed action or any proposed style or policy of action measures up to two concerns: how does it manifest the selfless holiness of God in Christ? And how can it serve as a gift that builds up the community called to show that holiness in its corporate life? (p. 12).

Williams doesn't provide an adequate explanation of what this means. In particular, he doesn't explain what it is to manifest God's "holiness in Christ" and how this differs (if at all) from manifesting or emulating Christ's love/*agape*.

2. *Essays in the Second Section.* Steven Pope's excellent paper, "Natural Law and Christian Ethics," gives a very clear and lucid account of natural law theory and its historical development. He provides a fair and informative account of disagreements between Catholics and Protestants about natural law. Jean Porter discusses virtue ethics and its development within the Christian tradition. Porter focuses on the idea of using a theory of virtue as a framework for ethics. She contrasts the distinctively Christian virtues of "faith, hope, and charity" with the "political" virtues of wisdom, justice, fortitude, and temperance. Apart from this, she doesn't have much to say about first-order theories of virtue or definitions of specific virtues. One interesting issue she might have considered is whether Aristotle's list of virtues and his definitions of specific virtues, e.g., pride or "high-mindedness," are consistent with Christian morality. Recall that Nietzsche describes Christian morality as an "inversion" of the values of the ancient world.

Ronald Green gives an interesting and fair-minded comparison of Jewish and Christian ethics. He contrasts: 1) the Jewish ethics of law with the Christian ethics of love, 2) Christian universalism and Jewish stress on the particularity of the Jewish people and their relation to God, and 3) Jewish and Christian attitudes about suffering. He claims that each ethical tradition has much to learn from the other and that the weaknesses of each tradition have a remedy in the strengths of the other. My only criticism is Green's reliance on very limited anecdotal evidence from his experience as a medical ethicist as the basis for his account of Christian attitudes about suffering.

3. *Essays in the Third Section.* The contributions in the final part of the book tend to be longer, less historical, and less purely expository than the others. Duncan Forrester's contribution, "Social Justice and Social Welfare," is an excellent and informative paper. He discusses Old Testament teachings about social justice and gives a detailed explanation of Catholic teachings about social justice, which on his account, constitute a more coherent and plausible body of thought about social justice than anything in the Protestant tradition. Luther's sharp distinction between the sacred and the secular realms comes in for criticism.

Michael Northcott's "Ecology and Christian Ethics," attempts to defend Christianity against the criticism that its ethical teachings are deeply implicated in the current ecological crisis. Northcott should be faulted for saying nothing about Genesis 1:28:

God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth."

This passage is often condemned in discussions of environmental ethics and animal rights. Many regard this teaching as the ultimate cause of what they take to be the West's very bad record on environmental matters. According to Northcott, the main ideological cause of the environmental crisis is the currency of materialistic mechanistic view of nature. He does not defend his claim adequately. He also fails to give adequate reasons for his contention that all non-theistic attempts to ground environmental ethics are problematic. Northcott is much more successful in pointing to distinctively religious/theistic bases for an environmental ethic – the view that the natural world is God's divine creation and the view that we are God's stewards of a natural world that belongs to God.

Max Stakehouse's paper "Business, Economics, and Christian Ethics," discusses Biblical views about the purposes or ends of economic production. It also discusses the Deuteronomic rules concerning fairness and honesty in business and the role of modern science and technology in the economic sphere. This paper is disappointing in that it makes no attempt to connect with current debates in the field of business ethics and says very little about controversial ethical questions in business. In what ways, if any, does Christian morality constrain business people from the policy of maximizing profits (or pursuing their own self-interests) while refraining from

fraud, deception, and breaking the law? Is the requirement to love our neighbor as ourselves compatible with conventional business practices (which involve pursuing one's own self-interests within certain constraints) in capitalist societies? Stakehouse does not address these questions.

Don Browning offers a forceful defense of the view that traditional two-parent families are beneficial to children and should be fostered by social policy. He claims that:

there should be, as a matter of ecclesial and public policy, a *presumption towards encouraging the formation and maintenance of intact families*. This rule has exceptions, but they do not undercut its importance as a cultural and religious guide (p. 246).

Browning claims that evolutionary psychology offers theory of family formation that closely models Aquinas's assumptions about family formation. Given that males do not help rear the young in most mammal species, why do male human beings become attached to their mates and help raise children? The answer of evolutionary psychology is roughly as follows. Because childhood dependency lasts so very long in humans, females need the help of males to raise their offspring. Humans have a special love and concern for those who share their own genes. Males will do a better job of caring for the young if they can be sure that those they care for are their own offspring. Thus, sexual fidelity (at least among females) is required for successful family formation. Monogamous relations are maintained by mutual affection, love for offspring, and sexual intimacy. Such relations tend to be beneficial for all parties.

James Childress offers a lucid and informative survey of issues in medical ethics: contraception, abortion, withholding and withdrawing life-sustaining treatments, active euthanasia, the definition of death, organ and tissue transplantation, access to health care, and applied genetics. He connects questions about active euthanasia closely with questions about the morality of suicide: roughly, active (voluntary) euthanasia is permissible only if suicide is permissible. Inasmuch as Christians view life as a gift from God, they must hold that there is a moral presumption against suicide.

4. *Evaluation*. Most of the selections are well-done and worth reading, although they are not deeply philosophical and most are not particularly original. Readers unfamiliar with theological ethics will learn much from this book; it offers clear accounts of many key issues in Christian ethics. Christian Philosophers who want to read more theology and theological ethics will find this book and its numerous references a good place to begin. Students and clergy will also find this a very useful reference.²

NOTES

1. In I Samuel 15, God orders Saul to attack the Amalekites and "utterly destroy all that they have; do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey." Later, God is angered that Saul spares Agag, the king of the Amalekites, and some of the Amalekite live-

stock, "the Lord was sorry that he had made Saul king over Israel" (NRSV).

2. Thanks to Chris Meyers for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this review.

Shame: Theory, Therapy, Theology, by Stephen Pattison. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000. Pp. x and 315. \$65.00

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Shame, by its nature, avoids the public eye. So also has it been with modern scholarly analyses of shame, at least in comparison to its near relative, guilt. This has changed in recent years, according to Stephen Pattison, Cardiff University practical theologian, as "a plethora of books with a huge variety of perspectives ranging from literature, sociology and philosophy to various kinds of psychology has emerged on the topic of shame" (p. 1). Still, a sufficient treatment of shame is lacking in theology, and he has written *Shame: Theory, Therapy, Theology* in order to meet this need.

Is shame good or bad? An impressive history of ethical and religious thought weighs in on the positive side of shame's connection to morality. Aristotle, e.g., commends shame (*aidôs*), though he rejects Greek tradition by not considering it fully a virtue. Shame is a kind of fear of disrepute, which can serve to restrain young people from doing shameful acts.¹ Similarly, Thomas Aquinas treats *verecundia* as a positive element of character, a kind of preparation for virtue.² For Puritan moralists, shame, as an internalization of moral authority, is essential to moral education.³ John Locke concurs: "Shame of doing amiss, and deserving Chastisement, is the only true Restraint belonging to Virtue. The Smart of the Rod, if Shame accompanies it not, soon ceases, and is forgotten, and will quickly by the Use lose its Terror."⁴

In light of this tradition, Pattison's account of shame is striking, as he focuses on a very different notion of shame, and draws a very different moral assessment. He gives brief acknowledgement to shame's positive role (pp. 2, 84-85), but does not develop an account of it, or explore its relation to the negative aspect or kind of shame ("chronic" or "dysfunctional" shame) that is his almost exclusive focus. For Pattison, the relation between shame and morality is overwhelmingly negative. He draws upon literature that is primarily recent, psychological, and sociological in character, focusing on studies of "shamed" individuals whose psyches are damaged by traumatic personal experiences.

Shame is a deeply personal book, drawing from Pattison's own experience of chronic shame, an experience he attributes in part to his involvement in the Christian faith. (This experience included a "sense of ontological guilt, fundamentally defiled identity and basic badness" (p. 7), and an experience of "ontological shame," i.e. "shame that relates to being human and finding oneself to be limited and mortal" (p. 181).) Pattison sketches three objectives for the study, roughly corresponding to the book's three