Book Review: Seeking Understanding: The Stob Lectures

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nature of persons. These principles allow for principled judgment of the many competing ethical narratives on offer.

Let me conclude with my own cautionary note. Although the necessity of narrative seems clear, the possibility of error looms large. Robert Frykenberg, in his essay on history seems aware of this problem as indicated by his use of scare-quotes in the following statement: “Narrative, if fully appreciated and comprehended in all of its manifold or subtle implications, becomes the quintessentially ideal vehicle for acquainting people with—and for the acquisition and transmission of—‘true’ understandings of the past” (117). Our memories and our history are necessarily selective and there is, as Griffiths notes, an infinite number of possible orders for any selected set of data. So narrative is risky business plagued with underdetermination, presuppositions and self-deception (it is not at all clear to me that non-narrative philosophy is immune). These sorts of concerns dampen enthusiasm for, for example, Jeffries’ use of repentance narratives to critique gnostic readings of scripture, because repentance narratives “explicitly insist on being read as in some fundamental sense ‘realistic’” (54). And they also ameliorate Frykenberg’s optimism that narratives provide “true” understandings of the past as well as Steiner’s claim that there is no difference between sacred and secular texts.


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Before Nicholas Wolterstorff, Richard Mouw, or Alvin Plantinga ever taught Christian philosophy at Calvin College, appreciative generations of students learned it from Professor Henry Stob. The Stob Lectures are an annual event at Calvin College and Seminary to recognize this distinguished alumnus and professor of both institutions who to judge by the tributes paid him had a profound influence on many current leaders in Christian thought. The lectures, delivered in the fields of ethics, apologetics, and philosophical theology, have drawn a particularly stellar roster of Christian thinkers. This volume collects the lectures given in the years 1986-1998, a particularly rich time in the current flowering of Christian thought in the United States at the end of the twentieth century. (Annual sets of lectures since 1999 will be published in individual volumes by Eerdmans.) The thirteen scholars who contributed to this book are diverse in terms of academic specialty, theological perspective, and institutional background, but philosophers, Reformed thinkers, and those with Calvin institutional roots predominate. Philosophy is represented by Dewey J. Hoitinga, Jr. of Grand Valley State University, Arthur Holmes of Wheaton College, Peter Kreeft of Boston College, George Mavrodes of the University of Michigan, Alvin Plantinga of the University of Notre Dame, Eleanore Stump of St. Louis University, and Nicholas P. Wolterstorff of Yale University Divinity School. Theologians include James M. Gustafson, Emory University, Martin E. Marty, University of Chicago
Divinity School, Lewis B. Smedes of Fuller Seminary, and Allen Verhey of Hope College. These essays are more accessible than most academic writing owing to their origins as public lectures. For that reason, this collection is an excellent introduction to the thought of these influential scholars and to the current state of Christian thought in America.

Because of the awkwardness of attempting to review such a wide variety of writings, I will highlight certain articles and attempt to indicate the range of topics and arguments offered.

Why do Christian ethicists seem all too often to be talking past one another? Might it be that they misunderstand each other’s methodological commitments? James Gustafson helpfully distinguishes four varieties of moral discourse used by Christians: prophetic, narrative, ethical, and policy. **Prophetic discourse** engages in moral or religious indictments aimed at the root of “religious, moral, or social waywardness,” while **narrative** “rehearses the history and traditional meanings” of religious communities. Gustafson numbers among the narrative ethicists his student and frequent critic Stanley Hauerwas. **Ethical discourse** uses the techniques and concepts of moral philosophy, whether natural law or Kantian, which raises the question whether “Christian ethics is so specifically Christian that at least aspects of Christian morality are obligatory only for Christians?” **Policy discourse** seeks to “prescribe quite particular courses of action about quite specific issues.” Gustafson argues that each of these complementary forms of discourse contributes something essential to Christian moral thinking while lacking in ways that the other forms of discourse can help to remedy.

In light of Gustafson’s delineation of forms of moral discourse, the inaugural lecture in the series given by Lewis B. Smedes perhaps is best seen as an exercise in narrative ethics when he examines what Christians understand themselves to be doing by making and keeping commitments. Our commitments, like those that God makes to us, empower us to be able to “say to someone: I am the one who will be there with you, no matter what.”

Allen Verhey’s lecture on the practices of piety and of medicine is both prophetic and narrative. Verhey is one of the most respected voices among those who insist on the importance of using theological method in bioethics, rather than for Christians to limit their contributions to whatever among their concerns they can translate into the neutral secular language that dominates the field. Prophetically Verhey inveighs against those who would exclude faith in all its rich particularity from the world of medical ethics and thus from the experiences of sick and dying believers. While medicine values impartial rationality and contemporary medical ethics offers neutral, generic principles, the Christian in medical ethical reflection must retain her perspective grounded in prayer, scripture, and the presence of Christ. Verhey offers a narrative of the Christian community as a fellowship formed by liturgy, prayer and Biblical teaching and offers a vision of medicine formed by Scripture.

Also in a narrative vein, Dewey J. Hoitinga, Jr., examines happiness in Plato and Calvin. Plato held a view of happiness that connects it deeply to knowledge and goodness, and Hoitinga shows that Calvin’s position offers interesting comparisons and contrasts to that view. The knowledge that is the foundation of our happiness is not, for Calvin, the intellectual achieve-
ment of the Platonic elite, but the gracious gift of God to all who receive.

For Alvin Plantinga the “twin pillars of Christian scholarship” are the negative pillar of the criticism of non-Christian perspectives and the positive one of application of what we know by faith to the problems of scholarship. He asks, “Why should we be buffafoed (or cowed) into trying to understand...from a naturalistic perspective?” (p. 145). Plantinga’s positive task is undertaken by Nicholas Wolterstorff, who shows that the Yale theology bears resemblance fruitful to the Reformed tradition of Christian thought. Those in the theological tradition exemplified by Hans Frei which is called Anselmian “resolutely renounces any general obligation to conform their endeavors to the results and self-image of the general academy” (p. 265). The positive task is also undertaken by Arthur Holmes, who describes a theology of Christian higher education with four dimensions: the improvement of the soul, the unity of truth whether known by reason or revelation, liberal learning as a preparation for service to the church and society, and “a pervasive doxological spirit” (p. 427). While Holmes explains and defends the Christian college, Martin Marty does the same for the denomination, “an earthen vessel, full of cracks and holes. But the church in the present day unfolding of history needs such vessels, or something like them” (p. 190).

Apologetics is represented by Eleanore Stump, for whom the problem of evil is not simply a theoretical issue to be argued but an experiential challenge to the believer. She argues that believers and nonbelievers will approach the problem differently because believers can consider their own experiences with God and their readings of the biblical narratives. As Plantinga urges, she approaches the problem of evil with what she knows as a Christian. The biblical accounts of Job and Abraham teach us that Christians need to respond to evil with a tough faith. “For Christians as for Abraham and for Job, religious experience, reason, and the testimony of authoritative narratives about God converge on the conclusion that God is good; and if he is good, then he does not break his promises” (p. 549).

Also taking up the apologetics task is Peter Kreeft, applying C. S. Lewis’s argument from the heart’s desire for God and Gabriel Marcel’s argument for immortality. “In the act of loving, the eye of love perceives immediately the necessity of immortality” (p. 112). George Mavrodes asks whether “a philosopher can find happiness in a haunted house?” Philosophy is perpetually haunted by the ghost of relativism, and Mavrodes finds important roles for relativism to play in philosophizing.

J. Harold Ellens asks whether theological categories of sin or psychological ones of sickness should be used to characterize and diagnose human ills, and concludes that we need to do “psycho-theology.” While psychopathology is at the root of our dysfunction, and most of that biochemically caused, “grace becomes a dynamic operational agent...in actually implementing the redemption and healing action in persons” (pp. 474-475). Along the way he offers a controversial account of scriptural authority to challenge the “American Fundamentalism” and “simplistic Evangelicalism” found in Reformed churches, views that hold “notions of scriptural authority which are based merely upon mythic theological philosophical foundations or confessional grounds” (p. 484). Rejected for example are the idea that God commanded the slaughter of the Canaanites
as well as Paul’s teachings on women. Scripture’s authority must be “based upon demonstrable operational grounds, rooted in empirical data, warranted by longitudinal studies regarding the manner in which its message effects genuine and measurable psycho-spiritually constructive change” (pp. 484-485). “Those aspects of Scripture therefore which effect discernible operational change of a redemptive or constructive nature, in real human experience, have authority...the rest does not” (p. 486). This is certainly an original proposal for finding the canon-within-the-canon, but one hardly likely to meet with acceptance by the Church’s theologians and philosophers, even those who are not simplistic Evangelicals.

At 550 pages and comprising thirteen lectures, this collection is value for money at the price. An index would have been very helpful indeed in this excellent syllabus of the current state of Christian thinking on a variety of topics by some of the most widely respected Christian thinkers today.