Reviews

COMMUNITY, LIBERALISM AND CHRISTIAN ETHICS by DAVID FERGUSSON (New Studies in Christian Ethics 13, *Cambridge University Press,* **Cambridge, 1998) xii + 220pp, (hardback) £35 (US$59.95)**

This is a stimulating book which brings together some of the most important recent work in the 'interface' between theology and moral philosophy. It concerns itself with the debates between communitarianism and liberal individualism and between realism and non-realism. How be communitarian without becoming sectarian or oppressive? How be liberal individualist without neglecting key features of human experience? How do justice to both the formative role of specific moral societies and to what is accessible to any sincere and rational agent? Fergusson shows how these debates are underway within philosophy, within theology and in places where the two meet.

He begins with a consideration of Stanley Hauerwas' 'ecclesial ethics'. Early Christianity was ethically distinct, a prophetic voice, at times counter to the prevailing culture, and ought to continue to be so. Barth, Lindbeck and John Paul II are summoned to witness to the continuing importance of this view for the Church. The dangers in ecclesial ethics are relativism and sectarianism (and patriarchal authoritarianism according to some feminist critics). Its advantages are its critique of liberal individualism and of 'quandary ethics', its explanation of how people learn morality within communities and traditions, and its creation of space for a radical, prophetic Christian voice.

So is Christian morality intelligible only within the parameters of a sect or does it link with parallel quests in the secular world? Hauerwas' position, according to Fergusson, is ontologically realist (truth is not relative) and epistemologically relative (truth is only available within a framework of belief). The fact that there is common moral ground in the absence of common moral theory requires a theological explanation which Barth rather than Hauerwas provides. Barth was wary of all traditional Protestant and Catholic ways of theorising about this (orders of creation, common grace, natural law) fearing that they establish some source or norm of ethical knowledge prior to what is given in the self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ. For Barth it is because God is also creator that we can speak of morality outwith Christianity. (That doesn't seem very far from Thomas Aquinas.)

Philosophers too debate individualism and communitarianism. Some lament the erosion of 'civic life' by liberal individualism and question its ability to provide an adequate account of the moral life. At the same time the Enlightenment aspiration to an objective, universal standard of morality is still cherished by some. Fergusson summarises recent philosophical considerations of realism, anti-realism and quasi-realism, intuitionism and emotivism, moral truth and moral pragmatism. Christian theology has an interest in arguments for realism because it believes that there are moral truths not of our making which, even if revealed to us, can also be recognised by those outside the Christian faith.

Alasdair MacIntyre's work is criticised for similar reasons as Hauerwas', his views are thought by some to presuppose the liberal values against which he argues, and in any case what alternative does

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he propose? Fergusson seems unconvinced by MacIntyre's 'post-modern reading of Thomas Aquinas' (p.118), raises questions about Thomas' way of 'baptising' natural morality and criticises MacIntyre on theological grounds. But he accepts that MacIntyre has achieved more than any theologian in reintroducing the discourse of the Christian faith to moral philosophy at the highest level.

On closer inspection, Fergusson continues, the differences between communitarianism and liberalism become blurred and the viewpoints converge. Charles Taylor argues that the terms are too unrefined to be of much use. A more urgent question concerns the ontological constitution of the self: is the self above attachments and commitments or constituted through them? For Habermas moral communication logically requires a commitment to certain (moral) procedures of speech and action, things like impartiality, consensus, and compromise. MacIntyre argues that Habermas' view has two defects: how does the logical shape of moral discourse create an obligation to respect the principle of universalisability (the problem of the grounding of Kant's categorical imperative emerging once again)? And must it not be that a substantive notion of the human good (freedom, altruism, universalism) underlies the procedural rules of justice (even though procedural ethics itself might be keen to deny this)? John Rawls' liberalism focuses on state neutrality between competing conceptions of the good life but involves a pragmatic moral consensus. For others liberalism, far from neglecting community and social role, enables the self to choose which social goods and commitments it wishes to pursue or reject.

In any case, Church and theology have a stake in liberal societies, more than is conceded by MacIntyre and Hauerwas, and liberal ideals are accommodated theologically. Freedom and 'social space' are essential for the church and for the integrity of the individual so that once again there is common ground without common theory in the convergence of liberal values with theological needs.

Two problems remain, says Fergusson, the legitimacy of the language of human rights, and the relationship of church and civil society. MacIntyre believes that rights language is too closely bound up with the inadequate claims of liberalism, lacks grounding in any theory of the good and is incapable of resolving significant moral disagreements (p.167). For Fergusson it is not clear that the concept of human rights is necessarily tethered to liberal individualism. It can be articulated in terms of the minimum conditions necessary for membership of a moral community, including therefore a substantive notion of the common good.

Fergusson describes his own position as 'neo-Barthian', wanting Christian ethics to be distinctive, faithful to the Church's witness to 'God made known in Jesus Christ'. As often with Barth and Barthianisms there is much fine assertion but one remains puzzled as to the roots of such assertions (in anything other than sheer proclamation) as well as wondering how it translates into practice. Fergusson admits that the Church has a stake in philosophical arguments for moral realism and can recognise common moral ground in pluralist societies even in the absence of common moral theory. What relationship is there then between philosophy and theology in this neo-Barthian view? Fergusson implies that there is some positive and mutually enriching co-relation but leaves us—leaves us waiting for what MacIntyre has to say next, it may be.

Fergusson clearly feels the weight of arguments from different sides and is anxious to do justice to what is true in them. The book draws together many essential strands in contemporary thought while the pattern he wishes to create with these strands remains somewhat

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unclear. Even with that, this kind of work is much more satisfying than the ventilation of this or that party position, whether philosophical, theological or political. It illustrates how we continue to be in need of fresh breakthroughs in moral theology. Alongside MacIntyre's new Benedict, then, we should perhaps be praying also for another Thomas Aquinas.

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WHO ARE WE NOW?: CHRISTIAN HUMANISM AND THE GLOBAL MARKET FROM HEGEL TO HEANEY, by Nicholas Boyle, *T & T Clark,* **Edinburgh, 1998. Pp. x + 348, £24.95.**

Coming into the rooms of a Cambridge don for the first supervision on my research into British foreign policy and German unification in the nineteenth century, I was courteously greeted and asked to take a seat. Just as I was about to do so, however, a voice yelled out, "Not there, but over there. I prefer to have Americans sit in that chair—it's older than your country." That, I suppose, was meant to be my first lesson: history was to be perceived differently in Britain. For all sorts of reasons, but not least because you could sit on it. The British have been sitting on their history for a long time. Very reluctantly (as if obliged to vacate a favourite easy-chair) are they coming to accept that the old furniture no longer supports their identity as comfortably as it once did.

Readers of *New Blackfriars* will already know that Nicholas Boyle is one Cambridge don with a different lesson on history. Versions of four chapters of his book were first published in this journal. For over a decade now, Boyle has been challenging himself and his compatriots to come to terms with how little their national past can prepare them for our global future. In the foreword, he tell us that this book was born of an "urgent necessity" to respond to an "historic crisis which must inevitably undo the British national identity constructed over the last three centuries." So "born" at a time when Mrs. Thatcher was coming off her third successive General Election victory and the Berlin Wall had but a little over a year to stand. Boyle need not perhaps then have felt constrained by his countrymen's preference for understatement. Ten years on, under a different government headed by a *new* party and with Europe slowly reconstructing rather than deconstructing, he may have a harder time convincing them of the urgency or the crisis.

All the more reason for re-reading his 1988 essay "Understanding Thatcherism" (here reprinted unchanged). It may not have been understood. For there has been no real turning back on the revolutionary transformation of Britain which Boyle, for the benefit of those not fixated on personalities, had endeavoured to place in the context of a more general and yes, inevitable, historical movement towards rationalised, centralised modern societies organised along the principles of economic accountability. The global market had finally and irreversibly extended, and with the usual painful social consequences seen elsewhere, its scarcely 'invisible' hand into the last imperially-minded national construction of old Europe—excepting the Soviet Union of course, whose turn was about to come. Or did one think it had been all to the blame or credit of Mrs. Thatcher? That what had been so often mistakenly attributed to her would go away with her? Boyle's historically perceptive analysis of Thatcherism, extended in a follow-up essay written for this book, should have pre-empted such anachronistic thinking about

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