THE COMMON GOOD AND CHRISTIAN ETHICS

The Common Good and Christian Ethics rethinks the ancient tradition of the common good in a way that addresses contemporary social divisions, both urban and global. David Hollenbach draws on social analysis, moral philosophy, and theological ethics to chart new directions in both urban life and global society. He argues that the division between the middle class and the poor in major cities and the challenges of globalization require a new commitment to the common good. Both believers and secular people must move toward new forms of solidarity if they are to live good lives together. Hollenbach proposes a positive vision of how a reconstructed understanding of the common good can lead to better lives for all today, both in cities and globally.

This interdisciplinary study makes both practical and theoretical contributions to the developing shape of social, cultural, and religious life today.

DAVID HOLLENBACH, S.J. is the Margaret O'Brien Flatley Professor of Catholic Theology at Boston College, where he teaches theological ethics and Christian social ethics. His books include *Catholicism and Liberalism: Contributions to American Public Philosophy*, edited with R. Bruce Douglass (Cambridge University Press, 1994); *Justice, Peace, and Human Rights: American Catholic Social Ethics in a Pluralistic World* (1988, 1990); *Nuclear Ethics: A Christian Moral Argument* (1983); and *Claims in Conflict: Retrieving and Renewing the Catholic Human Rights Tradition* (1979). He has also written numerous chapters in books and articles in journals such as *Theological Studies*, *Theology Today*, *Human Rights Quarterly*, *The Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics*, and *America*.

NEW STUDIES IN CHRISTIAN ETHICS 22

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Christian ethics has increasingly assumed a central place within academic theology. At the same time the growing power and ambiguity of modern science and the rising dissatisfaction within the social sciences about claims to value-neutrality have prompted renewed interest in ethics within the secular academic world. There is, therefore, a need for studies in Christian ethics which, as well as being concerned with the relevance of Christian ethics to the present-day secular debate, are well informed about parallel discussions in recent philosophy, science or social science. *New Studies in Christian Ethics* aims to provide books that do this at the highest intellectual level and demonstrate that Christian ethics can make a distinctive contribution to this debate – either in moral substance or in terms of underlying moral justifications.

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To the faculty, students, and staff of Hekima College,
who taught me much about the reality of solidarity
and the need for the global common good.

Opus justitae pax.

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General editor's preface

This book is the twenty-second in the series New Studies in Christian Ethics. It is written by the distinguished Jesuit theologian David Hollenbach on the theme of the common good that has been so central to recent Catholic social theology. More than that, Hollenbach himself has been a seminal influence upon the widely discussed social pronouncements of the American Catholic Bishops in recent years.

David Hollenbach shows that he is well aware of the difficulties that a notion of the common good faces in modern democratic societies. There is the long-standing fear engendered by the religious wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that still find parallels in tensions between Christians and Muslims in various parts of the world and specifically between Hindus and Muslims in India, between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, and between Jews and Muslims in Israel (I write this the day after the destruction of the World Trade Center). All too often in the past and in the present the "common" good has been imposed by one religious group upon another through coercion rather than mutually agreed through dialogue. There is also the self-evident cultural pluralism of modern democratic societies with sharp differences within and between religious and secular groups. It is hardly surprising that such societies tend to opt for a goal of tolerance rather than any shared common good.

However, David Hollenbach argues that tolerance on its own is simply not adequate to resolve all of the dilemmas of modern democratic societies. He cites at length two areas that particularly demonstrate this inadequacy. The first concerns the enduring poverty and inequality that characterize sizeable minorities

especially within American cities. The second relates to global issues, such as environmental degradation, which affect people across class and ethnic groups both nationally and internationally. In both of these areas Hollenbach argues that the notion of the common good adds dimensions of mutual respect and interrelatedness that are not present in a notion of tolerance.

A major section of this book then argues that churches have an important role to play in contributing to the common good even within pluralistic societies. David Hollenbach emphatically does not believe that churches and their theologians should address their concerns only to fellow Christians. On the contrary, he maintains that there is considerable empirical evidence suggesting that churches have contributed positively to the common good in a number of modern societies. He also believes that there are good theological reasons for believing that such activity is a proper function of churches. In arguing for this position he is well aware that he is seeking to counter currently popular exclusive theologians as well as secular philosophers who consider theology to be irrelevant to the public forum today.

There are many points of mutual concern between this important book and others within the series. Robert Gascoigne's *The Public Forum and Christian Ethics* takes a very similar inclusive approach to public theology, from a Catholic position, as does David Fergusson's *Community, Liberalism and Christian Ethics*, from a Reformed position. Douglas Hicks's *Inequality and Christian Ethics* explores at length the issue of urban inequality and Michael Northcott's *The Environment and Christian Ethics* that of environmental degradation. Together they admirably fulfill the two key aims of the series as a whole – namely to promote monographs in Christian ethics which engage centrally with the present secular moral debate at the highest possible intellectual level and, secondly, to encourage contributors to demonstrate that Christian ethics can make a distinctive contribution to this debate.

David Hollenbach's book is a very welcome and significant contribution to a crucial debate within Christian ethics today.

ROBIN GILL

Preface

The initial stimulus for this book came in the mid-1980s while I was working with the Catholic Bishops of the United States on the drafting of their pastoral letter on justice in the American economy. Both during the drafting of this document and after it had been published in its final form, I had the opportunity to speak often about the issues it discussed. These talks and papers were presented to church audiences, in secular academic settings, and in circles concerned with public policy. The experience of interaction with the audiences in all these settings led me to the conclusion that a central concept being advanced by the bishops' letter – the common good – was nearly incomprehensible to most of the people the bishops sought to address. This experience launched me into an extended period of reflection on what could be done to revitalize the notion of the common good in a way that could speak to both Christian believers and to citizens at large. Thus most of the ideas in this book arose from a cultural lack I experienced first-hand in trying to analyze and advocate an understanding of economic justice in pluralistic American society. Many of my preliminary efforts to clarify the issues were presented in writings listed in the Bibliography.

A second stimulus came from two academic terms spent teaching at Hekima College in Nairobi, Kenya, in 1996 and again in 2000. My students at Hekima College came from all over sub-Saharan Africa, east, west, and south. Some of them were from peoples who were at war with each other as we tried to work together in the same classroom. Some of them had themselves been refugees. Dialogue with them further deepened my conviction that developing an understanding of the common good that is plausible

in a diverse society is one of the greatest intellectual needs of our time. The problems faced by my African friends made it luminously clear that any understanding of the common good that can be meaningful today will be one that challenges cultural, racial, ethnic, and national definitions of who counts as part of the community. Indeed, the many problems faced throughout Africa today make it essential that we move from the brute fact of the world's growing interdependence to a greater sense of moral interdependence and solidarity.

The book's approach to the idea of the common good is in part inductive. Part One presents some aspects of the current social and cultural situation that suggest we need to bring the idea of the common good back into contemporary discourse and make it usable again. The challenges of poverty in central cities and of growing but unequal global interdependence are not the only ones that suggest the need for a revitalized understanding and commitment to the common good. I hope, though, that they show that the project of this book is not guided by a wistful desire to restore the past. The inductive approach of the book, in other words, begins from currently urgent problems that cannot be successfully addressed within the social paradigm that shapes most cultural and political activity today. Part Two then proposes how the notion of the common good that prevailed long ago might be reconstructed in ways that can speak to the contemporary situation. This section is especially concerned with how religious communities, particularly Christianity, can contribute to the common good. The central philosophical and theological aspects of the overall argument are presented in this second part. These theoretical arguments are developed while continuing to pay attention to the social contexts they seek to address. Thus even the more theoretical parts of the book remain close to the ground on which social interaction unfolds today. Finally Part Three uses the theoretical framework to cast some practical light on the problems raised at the outset, namely, urban poverty and globalization. This is not strictly speaking an "application" of the theoretical framework of a reconstructed understanding of the common good to these problems. Rather, it seeks to illuminate both the practical issues and the theory itself by bringing them into interaction with each other. The outcome

is an orientation or direction for the future, not a set of detailed prescriptions for decision-making and policy.

This book is dedicated to the many new friends I made at Hekima College. I also want to acknowledge that I have received much help from others along the way while working on it. Those who have contributed are too numerous to mention by name; the work of many of them appears in the bibliography. I want to single out my colleagues in the field of theological ethics here at Boston College, Lisa Sowle Cahill and Stephen Pope, and, at Weston Jesuit School of Theology, Edward Vacek, James Keenan and Thomas Massaro. Toni Ross, Kristin Heyer, and John Hardt have been very helpful in preparing the manuscript for publication. I also want to thank Margaret A. Farley, who has been continually supportive throughout this project as so often in the past, and my fellow members of the Jesuit Community at Boston College. All these people have helped me understand that there are goods that must be there for all of us if these goods are to be there for any of us.

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