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978-0-521-09024-7 - Concepts of Person and Christian Ethics

Stanley Rudman

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The concept and definition of personhood is central to current debates in ethics. Should 'personhood', for example, determine the allocation of scarce medical resources, and its perceived absence allow the termination of life?

In a wide-ranging discussion notable for its clarity, Stanley Rudman traces the development of modern ideas about personhood. He argues that concepts of person are socially constructed, and that the relational understanding of persons in a number of theological discussions can act as an important corrective to the individualistic notions of person which have been popular in secular philosophy since the Enlightenment. Early Christian views of divine speech, communication and relations between the persons of the Trinity can help to define an ethic which understands personhood in relation to other people, to the environment, and to God.

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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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# CONCEPTS OF PERSON AND CHRISTIAN ETHICS

STANLEY RUDMAN

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## *General editor's preface*

This book is the eleventh in the series *New Studies in Christian Ethics*. In many respects it returns to the pattern set in the very first book in the series, Kieran Cronin's well received *Rights and Christian Ethics*. Both books offer an important service for Christian ethics, providing reliable guides for the discipline through a complex area of philosophical discussions. It is the great merit of Cronin and Rudman that both authors show a knowledge of these discussions which is still rare amongst theologians and yet both also offer a position of their own which is distinctively theological.

Stanley Rudman sets out and contests the division being made by a number of secular philosophers (such as Peter Singer) between 'persons' and 'human beings'. He regards such divisions as both internally inconsistent and as having dubious ethical consequences (in Singer's case involving a justification of infanticide). For Rudman, human personhood 'is importantly related to relationships and communication between people as well as individual rationality and purpose. All of these features are best understood in a context of moral agency which includes human biology and environment, rational purpose and social belonging'. He argues at length that relational understandings of 'persons' – present within a number of theological understandings of 'persons' – are important correctives to the individualistic understandings, centring upon consciousness, that have been popular in secular philosophy since the Enlightenment. He then reviews the way this relational understanding was developed within the early Trinitarian and Christological debates, and argues that, appropriately



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*General editor's preface*

qualified, a specifically theological understanding does still have ethical relevance today. He concludes with an understanding of persons in relation to other persons, to the environment and, finally, to God as Trinity.

This is emphatically not a piece of theological imperialism. Stanley Rudman is sympathetic to Charles Taylor's position in *Sources of the Self* which opposes reductionist accounts of personhood and argues for an implicit notion of order based ultimately upon theism. Yet neither author wishes to claim that it is *only* theism which can support an adequate understanding of persons 'as human beings who are normally and essentially communicative'. Rather they believe that theism offers the most consonant account. For Rudman, adequate understandings of persons today 'chime well with the use of "persona" and "prosopon" in some of the theological thought of the early church, and can be linked with a view of God as person, which is characteristic of biblical tradition and still relevant to Christian ethics today.'

All of this fits well the two key aims of this series – namely to engage centrally with the secular moral debate at the highest possible intellectual level and, secondly, to demonstrate that Christian ethics can make a distinctive contribution to this debate, either in moral substance or in terms of underlying moral justifications. It is hoped that Stephen Clark's *Biology and Christian Ethics*, planned for a later stage in the series, will add further to the debate which Stanley Rudman initiates here. These are important issues for Christians and non-Christians alike.

ROBIN GILL

## *Acknowledgements*

Many debts have been incurred in the writing of this book over several years, none more so than to my wife, Sylvia, and our now grown-up family. Without their patience and co-operation it would not have been possible. I should also like to thank Professor Basil Mitchell for his timely support and encouragement, Professor Adrian Thatcher for his perceptive comments, and several colleagues, Peter Scott, Melissa Raphael and Craig Batholomew who read drafts and made useful suggestions. The series editor, Professor Robin Gill, and the officers of the Press have been unfailingly courteous and helpful.

## *Abbreviations*

<i>APQ</i>	<i>American Philosophical Quarterly</i>
<i>ChQR</i>	<i>Church Quarterly Review</i>
<i>CJP</i>	<i>Canadian Journal of Philosophy</i>
<i>ERE</i>	<i>Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics</i> (1908–26)
<i>IJPR</i>	<i>International Journal for Philosophy of Religion</i>
<i>JP</i>	<i>Journal of Philosophy</i>
<i>JR</i>	<i>Journal of Religion</i>
<i>JRE</i>	<i>Journal of Religious Ethics</i>
<i>JTS</i>	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
<i>NTS</i>	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
<i>PAS</i>	<i>Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society</i>
<i>PPA</i>	<i>Journal of Philosophy and Public Affairs</i>
<i>PQ</i>	<i>Philosophical Quarterly</i>
<i>RGG</i>	<i>Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart</i>
<i>RS</i>	<i>Religious Studies</i>
<i>SJT</i>	<i>Scottish Journal of Theology</i>
<i>St Patr</i>	<i>Studia Patristica</i>
<i>TG</i>	<i>Theologie und Glaube</i>
<i>TP</i>	<i>Theologie und Philosophie</i>
<i>TS</i>	<i>Theological Studies</i>
<i>ZNW</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>