

Too many parts of the world testify to the difficulties religions have in tolerating each other. It is often concluded that the only way tolerance and plurality can be protected is to keep religion out of the public square. Ian Markham challenges this secularist argument. In the first half of the book, he advances a careful critique of European culture which exposes the problem of plurality. His analysis of the Christendom Group is contrasted with the outlook found in the USA, where a religiously informed culture may be seen to be tolerant. In the second half of the book, the author argues that plurality is better safeguarded by a theistic, rather than a secularist, foundation. He submits that too often secularists use relativist arguments, while theists want to appeal to the complexity of God's world. He concludes that in our post-modern world the religious affirmation of diversity offers genuine political possibilities for cultural enrichment.

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PLURALITY AND CHRISTIAN ETHICS

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In recent years the study of Christian ethics has become an integral part of mainstream theological studies. The reasons for this are not hard to detect. It has become a more widely held view that Christian ethics is actually central to Christian theology as a whole. Theologians increasingly have had to ask what contemporary relevance their discipline has in a context where religious belief is on the wane, and whether Christian ethics (that is, an ethics based on the Gospel of Jesus Christ) has anything to say in a multi-faceted and complex secular society. There is now no shortage of books on most substantive moral issues, written from a wide variety of theological positions. However, what is lacking are books within Christian ethics which are taken at all seriously by those engaged in the wider secular debate. Too few are methodologically substantial; too few have an informed knowledge of parallel discussions in philosophy or the social sciences. This series attempts to remedy the situation. The aims of *New Studies in Christian Ethics* will therefore be twofold. First, to engage centrally with the secular moral debate at the highest possible intellectual level; second, 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 the series as a whole will make a substantial contribution to the discipline.

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PLURALITY AND CHRISTIAN ETHICS

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*To Lesley
with love*

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General editor's preface

This is the fourth book in the *New Studies in Christian Ethics* series. It tackles one of the most troublesome issues within both Christian and secular ethics today and does so with considerable panache.

The issue is pluralism – or rather ‘plurality’. Ian Markham wishes to avoid the term ‘pluralism’ as he believes it to be too identified with John Hick and with the specific problem of Christianity’s relationship to other religions. In contrast, the central problem that concerns this study is how Christianity relates distinctively (but without being exclusive) to a pluralistic political and economic order. In what appears to be an increasingly fragmented world – intellectually, culturally, and morally – how is Christian (or any other kind of) ethics to be done? This is an important issue which has obvious relevance to many intellectuals struggling with values in an ever more complex world.

In the first part of this book Ian Markham faces some of the key issues raised by plurality and secularism in complex modern societies. In the second he considers some of the British attempts to come to terms with plurality – particularly the so-called Christendom Group – of which he is fairly critical. In the third section he turns to North American attempts to cope with plurality. The summer of 1991 that he spent with the Institute on Religion and Public Life in New York provided the background for his research in this area. He makes out a good case to the effect that American Christian ethics has been rather better at coming to terms with the fact of plurality than British versions of Christian ethics. In the final section he puts forward

a very interesting thesis to the effect that Christian ethics and theological vision have something distinctive and rational to say which goes beyond the contentions of secular plurality.

As with Kieran Cronin's *Rights and Christian Ethics* which started the series, this is Ian Markham's first book. It is good to welcome both authors as distinctive younger voices bringing well-honed philosophical skills to Christian ethics. If once it might have been feared that philosophers were too clever for theologians, these two both show that today such fears are not well founded. A new era of rigour in Christian ethics seems to be dawning.

ROBIN GILL

Acknowledgments

Since 1986 I have been living with the issues that are explored in this book. During that time many a discussion and disagreement have contributed to the ideas within this study. In one sense it is both impossible and inappropriate to attempt to select those who deserve a mention. Yet not to mention anyone is equally misleading. So with grateful thanks to all who shared this project, special mention must be made of the following.

My theological outlook has been moulded by three institutions: Bodmin Comprehensive School where the RE teacher John Keast sensitively opened up the delights of academic theology; the Theology department at King's College, London provided my undergraduate training; and the Divinity School at the University of Cambridge, especially Canon Brian Hebblethwaite who supervised my research in philosophy of religion and ethics.

This particular study emerged from a three-month stay in 1991 at the Institute on Religion and Public Life in New York. The Institute did everything they could to ensure a successful summer. They provided delightful hospitality, from funding and office space to outstanding dinner conversations. Special mention must be made of the help and assistance of Richard John Neuhaus, Matthew Berke, and Jim Nuechterlein. During this time I stayed at the General Theological Seminary. For the kindness of Dean Fenhagen and his staff I am especially grateful. Mark and Dawn Goodman and Shannon Ledbetter also provided much needed distractions from the days spent in the Library.

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