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0521496780 - Community, Liberalism and Christian Ethics

David Fergusson

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COMMUNITY, LIBERALISM AND CHRISTIAN ETHICS

This book explores some current issues on the borderland between moral philosophy and Christian theology. Particular attention is paid to the issues at stake between liberals and communitarians and the dispute between realists, non-realists and quasi-realists. In the course of the discussion, the writings of Alasdair MacIntyre, George Lindbeck and Stanley Hauerwas are examined. While sympathetic to many of the typical features of post-liberalism, the argument is critical at selected points in seeking to defend realism and accommodate some aspects of liberalism. The position that emerges is more neo-Barthian than post-liberal. In maintaining the distinctiveness of Christian ethics and community, as determined by divine revelation, the book also seeks to acknowledge a measure of common moral ground held by those within and without the church.

DAVID FERGUSSON is Professor of Systematic Theology in the Department of Divinity with Religious Studies at the University of Aberdeen. He is a consultant editor and director of *Scottish Journal of Theology* and Chair on the Editorial Board of *Theology in Scotland*. His publications include *Bultmann* (Geoffrey Chapman, 1992), *Christ, Church and Society: Essays on John Baillie and Donald Baillie* (T. & T. Clark, 1993), and *The Cosmos and the Creator: an Introduction to the Theology of Creation* (SPCK, 1998).

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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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[More information](#)*General editor's preface*

This book is the thirteenth in the series *New Studies in Christian Ethics*. It provides an expert analysis of some of the most central themes in the series. David Fergusson combines skills as both a theologian and a philosopher, and uses them here to give a Christian response to one of the most challenging debates of our age – the moral debate between communitarians and liberals.

Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue* has succeeded beyond most other recent books in setting an agenda which has challenged many philosophers and theologians alike. Most of the other contributors to *New Studies in Christian Ethics* have made use of this seminal work. However, there has yet been no substantial philosophical discussion of it in the series or of the more specifically theological contributions of Stanley Hauerwas and George Lindbeck. David Fergusson's new book, *Community, Liberalism and Christian Ethics*, provides this. What he offers is an appreciative, but finally critical, account of this debate, which takes communitarianism seriously without abandoning all of the achievements of realism and liberalism. Unlike theologians such as Stanley Hauerwas and John Milbank, he offers an account of theology which is radical but not radically post-modern. In doing this, he sees himself more as a neo-Barthian than as a post-liberal.

What is at stake here? Within modern theology there is an increasing division between those who see themselves as a part of the liberal arts, engaging with secular disciplines and seeking to influence the wider political order from within, and those, in contrast, who argue that theology must abandon liberalism in

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General editor's preface

any form, looking instead to the unique resources of the Christian community, and building up a radical theological critique of post-Enlightenment thought. Within secular social and political thought there is also an increasing division between libertarians, who emphasise the autonomy of the individual and the centrality of individual choice, and communitarians, on the other hand, who stress the need for community, tradition, and interdependency. David Fergusson seeks to offer a bridge between these polarised positions. For him, it is essential that Christian ethics *is* distinctively Christian, albeit focused less upon the church than upon God made known in Jesus Christ. He is suspicious of those who exaggerate the distinctiveness of actual Christian communities and believes, instead, that Christians must still engage centrally with secular society. Liberalism has made real gains both within society and within Christian communities which do need to be recognised more frankly than is apparent in the writings of MacIntyre or Hauerwas. For David Fergusson, an appreciation of their distinctive contribution can be combined with a positive account of some of the central features of liberalism.

All of this admirably fulfils the two key aims of New Studies in Christian Ethics – 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. This book is a very welcome contribution to the series.

ROBIN GILL

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Preface

This book explores some boundary issues in theology and moral philosophy. Its particular focus is on the current series of disputes between communitarians and liberals, and realists and anti-realists. The central argument is of a Barthian character. There is a distinctive ethos governing Christian conduct. Human action must be seen in relation to the divine act and being which precede it and to which, at best, it bears the character of faithful witness and correspondence. The knowledge and service of God within the church, therefore, shape the moral perception, motivation, commitment, and seriousness of the Christian life. However, in relation to some recent ecclesial approaches to ethics, I seek to argue that the priority of God's action must be stressed over against the secondary reality of the church's *polis*. This in turn enables Christian theology to recognise, without compromising its central theme, how the will of God may be done beyond the walls of the church. I shall argue, in consequence of this, that theology has some stake in philosophical arguments for moral realism and that, within pluralist societies, the church can recognise common moral ground – thus making common cause with other forces, agencies, and movements – even in the absence of common moral theory.

I owe a debt of gratitude to many whose advice has assisted me in this project. I am grateful in particular to Robin Gill, the series editor, for his patience and encouragement in awaiting an overdue manuscript, and to Alex Wright whose support was important at an early stage. My Aberdeen colleague and friend, Iain Torrance has been an invaluable source of advice and

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reading suggestions. His expertise in the field of Christian ethics has been of much assistance, as has his readiness to share so many teaching and administrative tasks.

Earlier drafts of some sections were delivered at the Society for the Study of Theology and the Society for the Study of Christian Ethics, and I have benefited from comments made at these occasions. The completion of the project was made possible by a six-month period of research leave which was spent at the Center of Theological Inquiry, Princeton. I am grateful to Dr Wallace Alston, the Director of the Center, and to Bishop William Lazareth and my fellow members for their encouragement, support, and constructive criticism of my work on numerous occasions during our very happy stay in Princeton. I am also grateful to the Carnegie Trust for the Universities of Scotland for their financial support.

Since returning from Princeton, I have had the privilege of attending in Aberdeen the fourth in the annual Scottish Journal of Theology lecture series delivered by Stanley Hauerwas. Although I have not been able to assimilate this material in the present study, I wish to record my indebtedness to his writings and to the stimulus he has provided, even where we have parted company.

This book is dedicated to my parents for their interest and support over many years.

David A. S. Fergusson