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CHRISTIAN ETHICS AND CONTEMPORARY MORAL PROBLEMS

This book addresses such key ethical issues as euthanasia, the environment, biotechnology, abortion, the family, sexual ethics and the distribution of scarce resources for health care. Michael Banner argues that the task of Christian ethics is to understand the world and human kind in the light of the credal affirmations of the Christian faith, and to explicate this understanding in its significance for human action through a critical engagement with the concerns, claims and problems of other ethics. His book illustrates both the distinctiveness of Christian convictions in relation to the above issues, and also the critical dialogue with practices based on other convictions which this sense of distinctiveness motivates but does not prevent. The book's importance lies in its attempt to show the crucial difference which Christian belief makes to an understanding of these issues, whilst at the same time demonstrating some of the weaknesses and confusions of certain popular approaches to them.

MICHAEL BANNER is the F. D. Maurice Professor of Moral and Social Theology in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at King's College, London. He is the author of *The Justification of Science and the Rationality of Christian Belief* (1990) and has published a number of articles in academic journals. Professor Banner is a priest in the Church of England and is a member of the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution. From 1993 to 1995 he chaired the Government Committee of Enquiry on the Ethics of Emerging Technologies in the Breeding of Farm Animals. Since 1998 he has been Chairman of the Home Office's Animal Procedures Committee.

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To the memory of and in gratitude for
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'I thank my God in all remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, thankful for your fellowship in the gospel from the first day until now.'

(Philippians 1: 3–5)

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Preface

In *After Virtue*, Alasdair MacIntyre tells the story of the companions of Captain Cook who, despite their best efforts, were quite unable to make sense of the morals of the people of Polynesia, which in certain matters were unexpectedly severe: men and women were forbidden to eat together, for example, because this was taboo, though sexual relations between them were quite unregulated. Their attempts to understand the natives' claims that such and such was taboo produced no insight – they could fathom no rationale for the surprising proscriptions and the equally surprising permissions, and they could only judge the system of taboo unintelligible. Anthropologists in our day have concluded that, by the time of Cook, the cultural background in virtue of which the taboo rules had originally been understood and made sense had been quite forgotten, so that what remained seemed to Europeans and, on reflection, to Polynesians too, arbitrary prohibitions. So it was that under the questioning which the outsiders provoked, the whole system, plainly bereft of intelligibility, crumbled in the space of a generation.[1]

For MacIntyre, the story serves as a parable of our present circumstances. As a result of the pressures of the diverse intellectual forces we name the Enlightenment, we have been led to forget the deep accounts of the human good which could render our moral beliefs intelligible. In this state of collective amnesia, our moral discourse amounts to no more than fragments of a once coherent conversation, and increasingly ceases to have the character of conversation at all – thus, for MacIntyre, the assertion and counter-assertion of the advocates

[1] A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd edn (London, 1985), 111–12.

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and opponents of various rights typifies the shrill insistence which is bound to replace genuine discussion and argument in a culture which has forgotten the frameworks in which such discussion and argument is possible.

A good parable illustrates the essence of our situation or circumstances with a certain power and economy – and this the tale of Cook's companions surely does. And if, when we lay this parable against the reality it is meant to characterise – namely, the contemporary practice of moral discourse and debate – we find ourselves in need of a story with a somewhat finer mesh than it provides, this is not to reject the parable, but rather to elaborate it. In broad terms, MacIntyre's parable serves us well enough – reflective moralists, like Cook's comrades, will often find themselves looking on with blank incomprehension as the natives declare this and that taboo, whilst untroubled by actions we might have expected to be subjects at least of some concern (one thinks, for example, of fiery indignation regarding the use, without a women's consent, of the 'products of conception', from those who entertain no scruples about abortion). But there are interesting additional features which render the scene somewhat more complex and intricate. For certain of those who are nonchalantly using the ancient taboo system whilst not obviously able to offer an account of its foundations, grounds or rationale, are so thoroughly unaware of the system's historic roots, that they proclaim themselves its inventors! (Here one might think of the touching *naïveté* involved in the supposition that it is our century which has discovered human rights.) And then there are some who sense something of the difficulties with the taboo system, and placate their consciences by rejecting, in tones of shock and indignation, a part of it, while making use of another part. (Those who claim that economics is a science which dispenses with 'subjective' ethics provide a textbook example.) Additionally – to add an element which may or may not have been there in the original case – supposed guardians of at least certain elements of the taboo system, who should be able, as a matter of fact, to expound and explicate it, prove unable or unwilling to do so and indeed become some of its sternest (though least interesting) critics. (Certain self-professed

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practitioners of Christian ethics, especially those who pride themselves on 'beginning where people are', come to mind.)

If the reader doubts that things are quite as bleak as this extended parable suggests, I can only suppose that he or she has thus far been spared that important rite of intellectual passage, becoming a reviewer of books. Of course, there are other experiences which might bring one to one's senses as regards the state of contemporary moral discourse, but amongst those on offer book reviewing has the virtue (for those who dive rather than edge into bodies of cold water) of accomplishing the immersion with a certain rapidity. For, if one is to review honestly, and not simply for the sake of enlarging one's circle of friends, one has to face rather directly a question as to the merits of the book in hand. And repeated confrontation with this question persuades one, so I have found at least, of the general applicability of the parable, even if, thankfully, there are exceptions.

Mindful of Jeremiah, 6: 20b, it seems best not to dredge the past for the evidence which would serve to vindicate claims as to the utility of MacIntyre's story. (I shall, however, allow myself to refer the reader to a particular volume which, being a collection of essays, has the merit of displaying under one roof, so to speak, the rich variety of intellectual confusion, unintelligibility and inadequacy which, taken as a whole, is known as 'bioethics'.[2]) It is altogether more decent to move on and ask: what, in these circumstances, is the task of the moralist, and in particular the task of the Christian moralist?

It will be apparent to those who read the first chapter in this volume that, of the various uses to which an inaugural lecture can be put, I elected to issue a manifesto, and one on the very subject just mentioned. It contains a simple thesis: that the task of Christian ethics is to understand the world and humankind in the light of the knowledge of God revealed in Jesus Christ, witnessed to by the Scriptures, and proclaimed in the Creeds, and that Christian ethics may and must explicate this under-

[2] The book in question is *The Ethical Dimensions of the Biological Sciences*, ed. R. Bulger, E. Heitman and S. Reiser (Cambridge, 1993); for my discussion, see *Minerva*, 34 (1996), 199–204.

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standing in its significance for human action through a critical engagement with the concerns, claims and problems of other ethics. The chapter attempts to explain this thesis, and in particular to argue against the widespread fallacy which has it that Christian ethics which conceives of itself in the terms of the first half of the thesis, is prevented from taking up the tasks mentioned in the second half; that is, that Christian ethics which is aware of its particularity is unable to be a participant in contemporary debate.

Subsequent chapters, written on a variety of topics and for a variety of audiences, serve to illustrate both the distinctiveness of Christian convictions in relation to such issues as euthanasia, abortion, the family and so on, and also the critical dialogue with practices based on other convictions or none, which this sense of distinctiveness motivates but does not prevent. They also serve to illustrate what the first chapter refers to as the range of argumentative strategies and objectives which fully Christian ethics will employ. The final goal of Christian ethics must be to understand and represent human life in any and every sphere as it is determined by the action of God to which Christian faith bears witness. But this understanding, plainly, and to put it rather weakly, is not easily won. In the first place there is the matter of that in the light of which human life and action is to be comprehended; it is enough to note on this point perhaps, that, however long Barth had lived, the *Church Dogmatics* could only have been abandoned, but never finished. On the other side, however, the exact character of, say, the particular practices in question may be difficult to determine, perhaps because of their complexity or because the existing accounts of them are so pervasive, including within the Christian tradition itself, that even those who sense something of their inadequacy must struggle to escape from them. For whatever reason, Christian ethics may lack that understanding of the form of authentic human action to which it aspires, or have at best only glimmerings of it, and where this is so, and in the meantime, may intervene in contemporary debate with something less at its disposal than the comprehensive and fully adequate viewpoint which it hopes to be granted. (But then, it

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consoles itself with the thought that blowing up bridges behind enemy lines, even if it is neither the final work of an army of liberation nor necessarily of assistance to it, may at least serve to prevent the army of occupation oppressing the inhabitants as effectively as it otherwise would, and may also flush out collaborators who falsely claim to work for the liberation.) Readers will form for themselves a view of the modesty of the achievements of the chapters which follow, but will grasp straightaway, I hope, that in relation to a number of the topics treated in the chapters which follow – such as the environment and biotechnology – I have been only too aware of lacking an understanding of the subject which would permit something more than what might be deemed theologically inspired resistance.

What is the task of the Christian moralist, I asked a few paragraphs back, in the light of the circumstances depicted in the parable? As a matter of fact, the task of the Christian moralist is always and ever the same, and what changes are only the conditions in which this task is to be accomplished. These chapters display the very particular circumstances in which they were written, and not only the particular circumstances of the broad intellectual landscape pictured by MacIntyre, but also the local features of debates which have arisen at particular times and particular places within this landscape. But, if the contemporary Christian moralist properly recognises that he or she labours alongside others such as Augustine and Benedict and Vitoria (if only as an under-labourer), particularity of time and place should not, I hope, present a bar to understanding, let alone to disagreement.

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The assistance of particular people with particular chapters is acknowledged at the appropriate point. There are some, however, who provided assistance more generally, and I am glad to be able record my thanks to them.

Some of the chapters were written while I was a Fellow of Peterhouse, Cambridge, and the Fellows' Secretary at that time, Mrs Hazel Dunn, cheerfully and efficiently helped with their production. At King's College, London, Mrs Lavinia Harvey has undertaken similar tasks with the same good grace and skills, and has in addition tried to ensure that I do not undertake too many obligations, and, furthermore, that I have meet those that I have. I am therefore not the only person indebted to her. It goes without saying, perhaps, that to both Peterhouse and King's College London I am grateful for making such assistance available, and also for periods of sabbatical leave which enabled the completion of various chapters. The value of such leave would be much less if one could not count on excellent library facilities, and I have had the advantage of making use of the University Library in Cambridge, where the members of staff are unfailingly helpful.

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A book reveals many of its author's other dues through its footnotes, but not all those dues, and not always in a way which distinguishes between lesser and greater ones. Amongst the latter I should mention those to Basil Mitchell, my former research supervisor, and to Stanley Hauerwas and Oliver O'Donovan. Basil Mitchell's work is marked by the virtues of fairness, clarity, patience and rigour in the construction of an argument, and I hope that my admiration for him and his work exercises some discipline over my own. Formally speaking, I have been a pupil of neither Stanley Hauerwas nor Oliver O'Donovan; indeed, I have met Stanley Hauerwas on only a couple of occasions. I have been a pupil of both informally, however, and recall that it was a combination of reading *The Peaceable Kingdom* and attending some of the first lectures Oliver O'Donovan gave on his return to Oxford, which caused me to entertain the thought, radical in its context, that there really might be something distinctive about Christian ethics. If others have now joined Stanley Hauerwas in protesting at the 'Babylonish captivity' of the Church, it is right to recognise that at times he sounded a somewhat lone voice, albeit a voice of great vigour, imagination, insight and wit, the latter being the cause of the greatest offence to his rather humourless critics. Since my first encounter with Oliver O'Donovan, I have come to rely on his judgment, guidance and friendship, as well as on his magisterial contributions to the subject.

King's College, London, in general, and the Department to which I belong, in particular, is animated by an admirable spirit of commitment to and co-operation in the pursuit of research. I count myself especially fortunate in those immediate colleagues within the Department of Theology and Religious Studies with whom I share common interests and concerns, namely Colin Gunton, Paul Helm, Brian Horne, Alan Torrance and Francis Watson, and value immensely the opportunities which I have to learn from them. I should also mention Ben Quash, once one of my students and now Dean of Peterhouse, Cambridge, who, though he is not a colleague in this sense, fulfils such a role, for which I am grateful, as for his friendship.

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