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EVIL AND CHRISTIAN ETHICS

Genocide in Rwanda, multiple murder at Denver or Dunblane, the gruesome activities of serial killers – what makes these great evils, and why do they occur? In addressing such questions this book, unusually, interconnects contemporary moral philosophy with recent work in New Testament scholarship. The conclusions to emerge are surprising. Gordon Graham argues that the inability of modernist thought to account satisfactorily for evil and its occurrence should not lead us to embrace an eclectic postmodernism, but to take seriously some unfashionable pre-modern conceptions – Satan, demonic possession, spiritual powers, cosmic battles. Precisely because it strives to observe the high standards of clarity and rigour that are the hallmarks of philosophy in the analytical tradition, the book makes a powerful case for the rejection of humanism and naturalism, and for explaining the moral obligation to struggle against evil by reference to the New Testament's cosmic narrative.

GORDON GRAHAM is Regius Professor of Moral Philosophy at the University of Aberdeen. His books include *Historical Explanation Reconsidered* (1984), *Politics and its Place: a Study of Six Ideologies* (1986), *Contemporary Social Philosophy* (1987), *The Idea of Christian Charity* (1989), *Living the Good Life: an Introduction to Moral Philosophy* (1990), *Ethics and International Relations* (1997), *The Shape of the Past: a Philosophical Approach to History* (1997), *Philosophy of the Arts* (1997) and *The Internet: a Philosophical Enquiry* (1999). He has also published numerous journal and newspaper articles.

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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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*For the
Bishop,
Clergy and People
of the
Diocese of Aberdeen and Orkney*

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*We pieced our thoughts into philosophy,
And planned to bring the world under a rule,
Who are but weasels fighting in a hole.*

W. B. Yeats
from *Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen*

Contents

<i>General editor's preface</i>	<i>page</i> xi
<i>Preface</i>	xiii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xvii
1 Christian ethics or moral theology?	i
2 The real Jesus	29
3 Evil and action	74
4 Forces of light and forces of darkness	119
5 The transformation of evil	161
6 The theology of hope	205
<i>Bibliography</i>	230
<i>Index</i>	235

General editor's preface

This book is the twentieth in the series *New Studies in Christian Ethics*. It is very good to have another professional philosopher writing for the series and this is indeed a very unusual and challenging book. Several of the books in the series have combined philosophical and theological skills as this book does: notably, Kieran Cronin's *Rights and Christian Ethics*, Jean Porter's *Moral Action and Christian Ethics*, Garth Hallett's *Priorities and Christian Ethics* and Stephen R. L. Clark's *Biology and Christian Ethics*. All of these books closely reflect the two key aims of the series – 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.

Gordon Graham's concern here is that evil should be taken seriously. He argues at length that secular accounts of evil are inadequate, either because they seek to explain away evil as some disorder or malfunction, or because they maintain that there is no such thing as absolute evil, or because they offer no hope beyond evil. In contrast, he presents a powerful case for thinking that a Christian narrative can provide a more adequate basis for understanding and overcoming evil and that to believe coherently in the existence of absolute evil requires us to believe in a providential God. Now, of course, such claims will immediately be greeted with much scepticism since it is widely assumed that the problem of evil presents theists with a unique and insurmountable problem. Gordon Graham is well aware of this and offers an extended account of this 'problem', arguing in the

process that secularists actually have a greater problem of evil and that theologians do not lack rational and cogent responses to secularists at this point. After a fascinating account of gross moral evil in the form of multiple murderers, he concludes that 'humanism cannot explain (so to speak) the evil of evil, and naturalistic science, even of a well-informed psychological kind, cannot explain its occurrence'.

One way to understand this beautifully written and challenging book is to compare it with Jonathan Glover's recent book *Humanity*. A number of reviewers have noted that Glover gives a very full account of human evil in the twentieth century but a very inadequate (secular consequential) response to it. His well-researched empirical accounts of the evils perpetuated in Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Soviet Union, as well as those more recently in Rwanda, are not matched by the philosophical explanations that he offers. Parts of Gordon Graham's book also give meticulous, and sometimes harrowing, accounts of evil, but his theological explanations finally dominate. Not every theologian will agree with the latter – I remain more sceptical than he is about the ontological status and explanatory power of Satan – but they will need to be considered very seriously.

In short, this is an interdisciplinary book on an important theme which should make readers think. It is a very welcome addition to New Studies in Christian Ethics.

ROBIN GILL

Preface

Weary of the historicism, psychologism and relativism of the scientific study of religion, people long for revelation and demand a scientific approach to the Bible which does justice to its claim to be revelation.

Otto Eissfeldt (Quoted in Watson 1997: 19)

In his book *Facing Evil*, a book that addresses many of the themes with which I am concerned here, John Kekes remarks that ‘Christianity is another way of succumbing to false hope’. This book, though not a point by point response to Kekes (to whom I shall refer only occasionally), aims to refute that contention – not just to deny it, or to represent another point of view, but to *refute* it, and to do so in a way that makes my reasoning as transparently open to criticism as I can make it. There is no better task that philosophy can perform, in my view, than to construct clear and rigorous arguments about perennially important topics.

‘Refute’ overstates the case perhaps. To be realistic, my aim is the slightly more modest one of providing compelling (admittedly not conclusive) reasons for thinking Kekes’s view to be false. The way in which I propose to do so, however, cannot claim any fundamental originality. With considerable adaptation and extension, the elements of the line of thought I shall pursue are to be found in Kant’s second Critique, the *Critique of Practical Reason*. My argument is essentially a version of his so-called ‘moral argument for the existence of God’. Kant was one of the towering geniuses of Western thought. I am not. How then could I expect to improve on what he has to say?

I should say at the outset that this is not a work of Kantian exposition or interpretation. I have neither the requisite ability nor expertise. The reader who wants to know a lot about Kant will not find much illumination here. Rather, I aim to *deploy* some of Kant's conceptions and ideas. What marks out my treatment of the relevant subjects from Kant's, and will I hope commend it, is first, my attempt to provide the detail which his argument requires but which he does not himself supply, and second, my presentation of this amplified version in a new cultural context.

This context is new in at least two respects. Since Kant wrote, Christian theology has faced almost unprecedented challenges from the application of historical criticism to the New Testament, and from the sweeping success of evolutionary biology. The result is that compared with the period in which Kant formulated his philosophy, the present time is one in which theological conceptions cut little real intellectual ice. This condition is compounded, in my view, by the fact that, beginning with Schleiermacher's *Speeches to the Cultured Despisers of Religion*, the general tendency of those aiming to revitalise Christian theology and give it 'relevance' to 'the modern mind' has been anti-metaphysical and anti-orthodox. That is to say, a very great deal of contemporary Christian writing and reflection holds out little hope that the ideas and conceptions which have characterised Christian theology through most of its history can be made to apply directly to the intellectual and moral concerns of the contemporary world. Their aspiration is, rather, a 'new' theology, better adapted to post-Enlightenment, post-Darwinian times.

By contrast, my aim is to swim against both these currents. Lest I be accused of ante-deluvianism, however, I hasten to point out that my purpose is neither to defend biblical literalism nor play up the merits of Creationism. Nor is this new. Long ago Augustine also wrote for cultured despisers, and sought to undermine their *jéjeune* interpretation of the Scriptures, an interpretation which Christians no less than pagans were inclined to project. In a similar vein, despite lacking the brilliant and illuminating intelligence of St Augustine, I aim to identify

certain signal failures in contemporary secular thought, scientific as well as philosophical, and to show that it is only by re-invoking much older, broadly theological, conceptions that these deficiencies can be remedied. In other words, I want to focus on the explanatory tasks that modern thought has set itself, in the shared and firm conviction that the questions it addresses are crucially important – the nature of evil, the value of human life and the meaningfulness of morality – and to demonstrate as best I can that the naturalistic and humanistic presuppositions of modernity are inadequate to its own purposes. On the other hand, I have none of the inclination some Christian thinkers have shown to join the ranks of the postmodernists. Postmodernism, in so far as it is one thing, seems to me a new flight to unreason. I might better describe my intention as that of revitalising the pre-modern.

The odds are stacked against such an endeavour, as it seems to me, and I do not suppose that I have the ability to turn a powerful tide, though there are some signs, I think, that the tide is indeed turning. Still, however cogent, all such arguments will inevitably be thought to fly fruitlessly in the face of ‘the march of modern history’ (Marx). My inclination, I should admit, an inclination common to philosophers in all generations, is to uncover radical alternatives to contemporary truisms and to make them plausible, to put to the test what Alasdair MacIntyre has called the *Self-images of the Age*. Since I accept the Hegelian dictum that philosophy cannot ‘leap over Rhodes’, inevitably these alternatives are derived from conceptions with an ancient history. They have thus the advantage of being radically critical of modern ideas while at the same time calling upon the venerability of the accumulated wisdom of the ages, another reason for denying them any very great originality.

I do not expect to find many converts to my point of view. To most readers, I imagine, even if my arguments appear cogent enough, the conclusions I arrive at will seem absurd, to the postmodern no less than to the modern mind. I shall be satisfied, therefore, if both Christians and non-Christians who read this book come to the more modest view that some strands

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Frontmatter
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xvi

Preface

of philosophical theology they have hitherto dismissed, may not be as otiose as they have been inclined to suppose.

I am by training, occupation and intellectual disposition a moral philosopher in the Anglo-American tradition. By conviction I am a Christian. Inevitably, in the contemporary world, these are in tension. Still, I hope the present work will show that this tension can be creative.

Acknowledgements

In the course of preparing the material in this book I have had to engage in a number of areas of inquiry in which I am less than expert. Chief among these is New Testament scholarship. Let me here record my very great debt to the writings of N. T. Wright. The historical Jesus is a subject in which I have been interested for many years and some of the views I expound here I came to partly because of my chancing across a book to which I have found little reference elsewhere – E. F. Scott’s *The Validity of the Gospel Record*. But reading Wright’s impressive volumes (and those of other scholars to which they pointed me) led me to the opinion that between the ‘cutting edge’ of biblical scholarship and the concerns of contemporary philosophy there is a largely unremarked consonance and, accordingly, the possibility of fruitful exchange. This opinion was strengthened by the presence of Professor David Fergusson (now at the University of Edinburgh) and Professor Francis Watson among my academic colleagues at Aberdeen. Both the books they have written, and their comments on draft chapters of this one, have produced a marked improvement in what I have to say. Whether the prospects of collaboration between biblical theology and moral philosophy are as bright as I think, I leave the reader to judge.

I am also grateful to the incisive comments of my colleague in philosophy, Dr Jonathan Friday, and, as on many previous occasions, to my daughter Lindsay Graham for invaluable editorial assistance.

I must also acknowledge my debt to members of the Philosophy Department at Calvin College, in Michigan, especially Dr Kelly Clarke. They accorded me the very great distinction

of election to the Jellema Lectureship in Philosophy and Religion for 1998. The lectures, under the title ‘Ethics and the Real Jesus’, gave me the occasion to put my thoughts on these matters into order for the first time, and conversations at Calvin with Professor John E. Hare, author of *The Moral Gap*, greatly enriched them. The subsequent suggestion from the editors of *New Studies in Christian Ethics* that I write a book in this series presented me with the opportunity to try and spell them out in a reasonably extended and rigorous form. The comments of both an anonymous reader and of Professor Robin Gill, the General Editor, have still further improved the final result.

An earlier version of chapter six was read to a conference on ‘The Biblical Theology of Hope’, and subsequently appeared in *The Evangelical Quarterly*. I am grateful to the Editor, Professor Howard Marshall, for permission to reproduce some of it here.

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