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ALTRUISM AND CHRISTIAN ETHICS

Separated from its anchorage in religion, ethics has followed the social sciences in seeing human beings as fundamentally characterized by self-interest, so that altruism is either naively idealistic or arrogantly self-sufficient. Colin Grant contends that, as a modern secular concept, altruism is a parody on the self-giving love of Christianity, so that its dismissal represents a social leveling that loses the depths that theology makes intelligible and religion makes possible.

The Christian affirmation is that God is characterized by self-giving love (*agape*), then expected of Christians. Lacking this theological background, the focus on self-interest in sociobiology and economics, and on human realism in the political focus of John Rawls or the feminist sociability of Carol Gilligan, finds altruism naive or a dangerous distraction from real possibilities of mutual support. This book argues that to dispense with altruism is to dispense with God and with the divine transformation of human possibilities.

COLIN GRANT is Professor of Religious Studies at Mount Allison University, Sackville, New Brunswick. Author of *A Salvation Audit* (1994) and *Myths We Live By* (1998), he has also published journal articles in Britain, America, and Canada. He is a member of the American Academy of Religion, the Canadian Society for the Study of Religion, and the Canadian Theological Society.

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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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*This book is dedicated to the memory of
recently deceased colleagues and friends
on both side of the Atlantic.*

Canadian philosophers Ross Stanway and Gordon Treash

and

Church of Scotland ministers Robin Hall and George Poustie

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General editor's preface

This book is the eighteenth in the series *New Studies in Christian Ethics*. It shares with an adjacent series title, Stephen Clark's *Biology and Christian Ethics*, a critique of writers such as Richard Dawkins and E. O. Wilson. It also works closely with the central thesis of an earlier book in the series, Garth Hallett's *Priorities and Christian Ethics*, namely that a radical concern for others should be a key feature of morality and that it is Christian, not secular, ethics which is best able to defend this concern. Colin Grant's new book is essentially a book examining modern critics of altruism, which uses historical resources only when relevant. It does not intend to examine in detail the historical sources that may lie behind the essentially modern concept of altruism.

Altruism and Christian Ethics is a scholarly and well-written book which offers an extended analysis of the secular literature on a single concept, followed by an examination of how a specifically theological understanding can make an additional contribution. As result, it reflects well the two key aims of the series – first, 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.

What emerges at the end of this study is that altruism is a vital but paradoxical moral concept. Christian ethicists would scarcely be wise to endorse all forms of altruism in secular society. Kamikaze pilots in World War II, or suicide bombers in modern Israel, may well act altruistically, yet Christian ethicists

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would hesitate to applaud them. In addition, those who explicitly and deliberately seek to act altruistically soon discover that their motives may appear less than altruistic to others. Furthermore, although there does seem to be evidence that the religiously active are more inclined to altruism than other people (as I attempt to show in my own book in the series, *Churchgoing and Christian Ethics*), this evidence is not ubiquitous or irrefutable. Colin Grant is sensitive to these difficulties in his defence of altruism. While remaining critical of much of the actual behavior of Christians, he argues that it is finally theology which makes most sense of altruism.

In presenting such a full defence of altruism against scientific, sociological, philosophical, and even theological critics, Colin Grant's *Altruism and Christian Ethics* is a very welcome addition to the series.

ROBIN GILL

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Preface

Few themes enjoy such prominence in so many varied areas of contemporary life and thought as the subject of altruism. To popular perception, the ills of contemporary life are largely traceable to a deficiency of altruism. The greed and self-seeking of consumer culture are seen to be indicative of the erosion of social bonds that kept life more humane in earlier ages. This prominent view is directly contradicted by much contemporary scholarship, which sees altruism, and the assumptions that underlie it, as detractions from our most positive possibilities. Altruism is seen to represent an ideal of self-sacrifice that really reflects a domineering and condescending attitude on the part of the altruist, in contrast to the possibilities for mutual growth that a more egalitarian social vision would encourage. This critique of altruism extends to the religious domain, as traditional notions of divine grace, represented in the understanding of God in terms of *agape*, for instance, are challenged in the name of a life-seeking *eros* and the humane mutuality of *philia*.

The thesis defended here is that altruism is a modern secular concept that betrays theological overtones, and that dismissal of the notion endangers the lingering theological sensibility it echoes. The origin of the concept is generally attributed to the pioneer of sociology, Auguste Comte. For him, it designated the prospects for socially enlightened humanity, now that the restrictions of theology were being outgrown. Although theology was consigned to the past, religion enjoyed a much more positive status with Comte. This was not religion in any conventional sense, but the new positive religion of humanity, as was befitting the positive age that was dawning through the incom-

parable mastery of science. Altruism emerges as one of the central doctrines of this new religion of humanity. It is a confession of belief in the social prospects for humanity, once the shackles and distortions of conventional religion are abandoned. In this way, altruism represents a naively humanistic concept, but it also reflects lingering influences of theological sensibility in its vision of prospects for human greatness. Theological unease with this idealistic secular concept are understandable; however, when this unease results in dismissal of the whole notion, this may entail not only an accompanying dismissal of that lingering theological sensibility, but in fact one that succumbs to the social horizon in the secular form promoted by Comte.

John Rawls' program for allowing people to cooperate politically, in spite of holding diverse metaphysical and religious visions, for example, assumes an inherent cooperativeness on the part of humanity, not unlike the religion of humanity envisioned by Comte, along with a marginalization of fundamental visions that renders them irrelevant to requirements of political consensus. Ethicists who extol mutuality, and renounce hierarchy in such totalitarian terms that any sense of transcendent reality is displaced by a humanistic leveling, can be seen to reflect the social horizon pioneered by Comte. Transcendent theological claims recede before an acquiescence in a religion of humanity shorn of Comte's hope for altruistic achievement.

Suspicion of altruism is not without foundation, precisely because it has emerged in, and become identified with, a secular humanistic horizon, a religion of humanity in Comte's sense. Sociobiologists, who regard altruism as unnatural, and communitarian ethicists of various stripes who regard it as a distraction from the real possibilities of mutual assistance, are right to see altruism as radically idealistic. It does not belong in a world where we are programmed genetically to look out for ourselves, or at most for those who share our genes, and preoccupation with it can be an excuse for offering the real assistance that is possible in our own situation. The question is whether this is our real situation. One prominent, long-standing reading of the Christian gospel would proffer a very different

assessment. On this view, the despair over altruism, in terms of both the high odds against it and the distortions that it can entail, are fully justified, but these are not the last word on the human situation. They represent a depiction of humanity considered on its own; in other words, humanity in a state of sin. Redeemed humanity, on the other hand, recognizes that it lives by divine grace, and in that recognition a possibility for living opens up that encompasses even the extreme of altruism. This theological vision is implicit in the extreme other-regard of altruism. Separated from the theological background, as altruism was from its inception, it is bound to founder. Sociobiological and social critics of it are right. In itself, it is wildly idealistic, and perhaps also domineering and condescending. But this may be more a comment on the superficiality of modern secularity, and a reflection of the reality of sin, than exposure of inherent inadequacy in the direction identified by altruism.

Dismissal of altruism, and substitution of more circumscribed visions, represents an impoverishment of human vision, and one that is likely to promote further long-term erosion of human community, rather than facilitating its development, as its advocates hold. It is especially disturbing to see this direction embraced in the name of theology. Thus, Stephen J. Pope basically accepts sociobiology's "naturalization" of altruism, finding there an adequate base on which to graft a Thomistic extension of the order of love. Stephen G. Post proposes a similar extension of sympathy from the immediate relations in which we find ourselves to the stranger. Such treatments assume a natural order, intelligible in itself, and perhaps even essentially as portrayed in sociobiology, from which anything approaching altruism can only emerge from a base of caring for ourselves and those closest to us. Such a depiction fits our experience of life generally. However, as Garth Hallett has argued, in this present series, it does not fit the gospel. Far from advocating an expansion of a native self-concern, the whole thrust of the gospel is toward extravagance of caring that is identified in the modern notion of altruism. Of course, this is not practical. It is not sensible. It is not reasonable. But it is what Jesus is reported

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to have taught, and it is indicative of the radical way in which he lived and died. Practical sociability seems much more accessible, but this direction courts Comte's new horizon, without the theological legacy he retained, and it places in jeopardy the most distinctive direction of the gospel.

Radical acknowledgment of the direction of altruism, as proposed here, is impractical and dangerous. It encourages lofty visions, invites fanaticism, and promotes neglect of practical realities. Thus it is by no means the last word for Christian practice. In *Priorities and Christian Ethics*, Garth Hallett wrestles with the ethical dilemma of a father who must decide whether to finance his son's university education or contribute to famine relief. Common sense, and considerable current opinion, would hardly hesitate in affirming the father's responsibility to his son. However, Hallett recognizes that the gospel is pulling in the opposite direction. This is the dilemma of ethics, not how to choose between good and evil, but how to identify and decide between better and best. The gospel presents us with a radical claim that is not easily reconciled with the ordinary circumstances of life. Other volumes in this series also wrestle with this challenge. Lisa Cahill examines the complexities of contemporary gender issues in the light of the directives of the gospel in *Sex, Gender, and Christian Ethics*, for example, and Jean Porter develops an approach to ethics in terms of a Thomistic version of moral agency in *Moral Action and Christian Ethics*. The present volume does not deal with specifics of ethics, Christian or otherwise, but rather with the context of ethics, especially any ethics that would claim Christian sponsorship. Its claim is that it is difficult to see how an ethics that does not have a place for something like what we have come to think of as altruism could or would want to claim the label Christian.

In addition to not dealing with the nitty gritty of ethics, this volume does not attempt to trace any intricate link between the modern concept of altruism and the Christian tradition. It focuses on altruism as a modern concept, and sees it reflecting a prominent direction of the gospel represented in the unique New Testament notion of love as *agape*. Even here, however, the focus is on recent treatments of *agape*, and particularly on

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challenges to it in the name of the other forms of love, *eros* and *philia*. Reflection is restricted to the central thesis that this modern notion of altruism represents a crypto-Christian concept that invites criticism because of its untenability apart from the gospel that gives it meaning and motivation, but that criticism that dispenses with the concept also risks domesticating the radical gospel of extravagant care.

The book begins by examining the concerted effort of socio-biology to explain away every semblance of altruism in favor of its own self-interest vision, and the contrasting recent rediscovery of altruism in the social sciences. Already at this level, basic ambiguities that cling to considerations of altruism begin to appear. These become even more evident at the level where altruism could be expected to be embraced more directly, namely in ethics. The prominent rational approach of Kantian duty ethics treats altruism as the rational requirement of impartiality, that I treat myself as an other, so that any inclination to self-indulgence is submitted to the moral law. The sympathy ethics, sketched by Hume, and developed recently in feminist ethics, sees altruism as much more “natural” because ethics is seen in terms of our relations with those closest to us, and human life is seen to be characterized essentially by relation. Although modern ethics finds a place for altruism, it is a chastened and restricted altruism that is acknowledged in either rational duty ethics or relational sympathy ethics.

Altruism is a modern concept, but its roots lie in the Christian understanding of love as *agape*, the self-giving love that is seen to be characteristic of God and in which human beings are called to participate. The suspicion that academics direct to altruism is directed to *agape* by some contemporary theologians, and while their critique of the neglect of *eros*, needy acquisitive love, and *philia*, the love of mutuality, is germane, it is not clear why an appreciation for *eros* and *philia* would have to displace *agape*. There may even be point to the claim of recent theologians that God must be seen to be qualified by *eros*, if the world is to have the alterity that would make divine altruism possible. This does not have to be seen to demean God because the dynamic reality of God encompasses and transcends the distinctions between

agape and *eros*, just as altruism encompasses and transcends the distinctions between self and other. Indeed, the transcendent dimensions of both *agape* and altruism point to the fact that the significance of altruism is finally religious.

Altruism displays ambiguities that conceal three fundamental paradoxes. Seeing life in terms of self-interest provides the contrast that allows altruism to be identified in the first place; however, it also entails the corollary that any putative instances of altruism are inherently suspect. This poses the psychological paradox that since any pleasure, including pleasure in the welfare of others, is our own pleasure, there is a sense in which altruism can never escape the suspicion of really being a variation on self-interest. Altruism comes into its own on the moral level, but that exposes the moral paradox, namely, that the more altruism is seen as an ideal, the less basis it is seen to have in reality, whereas the more it is seen to be real, the less urgency and scope it has as an ideal. Most devastating of all is the third paradox, the religious one, involved in the realization that self-conscious, deliberate altruism is a contradiction in terms. This carries the implication that genuine altruism is intrinsically impossible.

The solution to the paradoxes of altruism proposed here builds on the recognition that genuine altruism is possible only by indirection. Deliberateness undermines the genuineness of altruism. From its recognition against the background of the self-interest perspective, through its pursuit in some form in moral terms, to its explicit promotion in religion, altruism becomes increasingly problematic. This is what renders it paradoxical to the point of appearing impossible. Altruism that is explicit and deliberate raises suspicions of self-interest and ultimately of self-righteousness. The answer to this dilemma, however, lies not in abandoning interest in altruism, but in recognizing a deeper dimension in life to which it is pointing. The implication of the elusiveness of altruism is that at its fullest life is lived in terms of indirection. Thus altruism is most genuine when it is “natural,” rather than deliberate. Ironically, this also applies to the interests of the self. The biggest barrier to self-fulfilment is its deliberate pursuit. Just as happiness

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happens when we are involved in something, rather than seeking to be happy as such, so self-fulfilment happens when we are engaged from beyond ourselves. Self-fulfilment ultimately depends on self-transcendence. This is essentially the claim that is made by religion, that the meaning of our lives is to be found beyond ourselves. Thus the indirectness required by genuine altruism finally points to the reality of religion. Altruism at its richest may be seen as the formal principle of religion; religion, then, is the material principle of altruism. Contemporary suspicion of altruism reflects our secular inability to live from beyond ourselves.

Some portions of this book have appeared in journal articles. The substance of chapter 1 appeared as “The Odds Against Altruism: The Sociobiology Agenda,” *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 45/2 (1993): 96–110, and of chapter 2 as “Altruism: A Social Science Chameleon,” *Zygon* 32/3 (1997): 321–40. The first half of chapter 3 draws on material from “The Gregarious Metaphor of the Selfish Gene,” *Religious Studies* 27/4 (1991): 431–50, and portions of chapter 6 appeared in “Why Care? The Basis and Implications of Care Morality,” *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 24/3 (1995): 331–49. Chapter 7 is a variation on “For the Love of God: Agape,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 24/1 (1996): 3–21.

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