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HEALTH CARE AND CHRISTIAN ETHICS

How can Christian ethics make a significant contribution to health care ethics in today's Western, pluralistic society? Robin Gill examines the 'moral gaps' in secular accounts of health care ethics and the tensions within specifically theological accounts. He explores the healing stories in the Synoptic Gospels, identifying four core virtues present within them – compassion, care, faith and humility – that might bring greater depth to a purely secular interpretation of health care ethics. Each of these virtues is examined in turn, using a range of topical issues including health care rationing, genetics, HIV/AIDS, withholding/withdrawing nutrition from PVS patients, and the empirical evidence which suggests a connection between religion and health. Professor Gill also argues that these four virtues are shared by other major religious and humanistic traditions and that, together with secular principles, they can enrich health care ethics even in a pluralistic society.

ROBIN GILL is Michael Ramsey Professor of Modern Theology at University of Kent, Canterbury. He is series editor of *New Studies in Christian Ethics*, author of *Churchgoing and Christian Ethics* (1999) and editor of *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Ethics* (2000). Professor Gill is Chair of the Archbishop of Canterbury's Medical Ethics Advisory Group and a member of the BMA Medical Ethics Committee, although he writes here in his own capacity.

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NEW STUDIES IN CHRISTIAN ETHICS

General Editor: Robin Gill

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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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Series editor's preface

This book is the twenty-sixth in the series *New Studies in Christian Ethics*, and the second contribution by its distinguished General Editor, Robin Gill. The author of *Health Care and Christian Ethics* ably advances the twin goals he has set for the series as a whole. The book both engages the secular moral debate about health care at the highest intellectual level and demonstrates the distinctive contribution of Christian ethics to that discussion. In so doing, Professor Gill illuminates many of the changes that have taken place in medical ethics and moral theory in recent decades.

At one point, medical ethics seemed a textbook example of the synthesis between Christian tradition and secular ethics. Christian ethicists initially took a leading role in framing principles of autonomy, physician responsibility, and patient rights for public use in health care settings. Application of the principles to specific questions of medical practice could then proceed independently of religious authority, but without hostility or indifference to religious traditions.

The terms of the discussion have changed dramatically, both in medicine and in ethics. Specialists in health care ethics now find the principles that shaped the discipline in its early days too abstract to be helpful apart from a rich cultural context that shapes use of principles and forms the character of those who offer care. This concern that moral principles, taken by themselves, are too 'thin' to offer real guidance converges with a broader development in moral philosophy which focuses on communities of virtue, rather than on autonomous agents making principled decisions about discrete moral questions.

However, this apparent agreement on the new shape of moral discourse quickly evaporates. Both philosophers and theologians often emphasise the importance of extended and highly developed

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traditions which can hardly be approximated in the pluralistic institutional settings of contemporary health care. The language of Christian theology, with its eschatological and Christological convictions, becomes for some the necessary precondition for meaningful moral discussion. On this view, public discussions in secular society simply lack the coherence necessary to provide real moral direction.

Robin Gill begins *Health Care and Christian Ethics* by setting the questions of health care ethics in the context of this larger debate about virtue ethics and the possibility of public theology. He then takes up the challenge of identifying values that are specifically grounded in Christian moral traditions about health and care, beginning with an extensive study of healing in the Synoptic Gospels. With a particularity that might have been disqualifying in the earlier search for general principles, he identifies four core values – compassion, care, faith and humility – that emerge from the Synoptic tradition and provide the basis for a critical Christian stance towards health and health care practices today.

Robin Gill's work has, however, also been characterised by realistic social assessments that refuse to take religious claims to moral uniqueness at face value. Alongside the distinctive values and virtues of the Christian heritage, he traces the interaction of Christian communities with other traditions and with the wider society. His earlier title in this series, *Churchgoing and Christian Ethics*, showed that the implementation of distinctive religious values is shaped by relationships with other aspects of the culture, even as the church contributes some version of its values to the wider discussion. Attentiveness to social reality should make us cautious supposing that theology alone guides the implementation of the core values of compassion, care, faith and humility or that persons outside of the tradition will find those values incomprehensible.

Robin Gill's study of Christian values in relation to the practical issues of health care recalls other titles in this series which have focused on specific problem areas, including Michael Northcott's *The Environment and Christian Ethics*, Peter Sedgwick's *The Market Economy and Christian Ethics*, and Douglas Hicks' study of urban society in *Inequality and Christian Ethics*. The exploration of specific Christian values connects with Garth Hallett's *Priorities and Christian Ethics*, and the study of the Synoptic healing stories returns

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to the issues raised in Ian McDonald's *Biblical Interpretation and Christian Ethics*. To think about health care in the terms Robin Gill provides leads us beyond those specific issues into a discussion of Christianity's contemporary public role that has also been presented in David Fergusson's *Community, Liberalism and Christian Ethics*, Robert Gascoigne's *The Public Forum and Christian Ethics* and David Hollenbach's *The Common Good and Christian Ethics*. Professor Gill's mastery of this broad range of literature and questions has given us an important book which contributes to health care ethics and illuminates new possibilities for the wider discussion about public theology.

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I am most grateful to colleagues at quite a number of conferences – including the national conference of hospital chaplains, the Society for the Study of Christian Ethics, the British Sociological Association's Sociology of Religion Study Group, British Medical Association's Study Conferences, and various parish-based conferences on medical ethics – as well as to numerous postgraduate students in medical ethics at the University of Kent. I have always found it immensely helpful to test out ideas on colleagues and students alike before committing them to print. Health care ethics can sometimes become too individualistic. The illustration reproduced on the cover of this book, from the glorious Edward Burne-Jones window at Birmingham Cathedral, depicts a more communal perspective, as well as pointing to the virtues of compassion, care, faith and humility that are so central to this study.

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Finally Jenny has been my loving companion for forty years. In moments of medical confusion while writing this book it has been especially good to have a doctor in the house.