

LYING AND CHRISTIAN ETHICS

Lying and Christian Ethics defends the controversial “absolute view” of lying, which maintains that an assertion contrary to the speaker’s mind is always wrong, regardless of the speaker’s intentions. Whereas most people believe that a lie told for a good cause, such as protecting Jews from discovery by Nazis, is morally acceptable, Christopher O. Tollefsen argues that Christians should support the absolute view. He looks back to the writings of Augustine and Aquinas to illustrate that lying violates the basic human goods of integrity and sociality, and severely compromises the values of religion and truth. He critiques the comparatively permissive views espoused by Cassian, Bonhoeffer, and Niebuhr, and argues that lies often jeopardize the good causes for which they are told. Beyond framing a moral absolute against lying, this book explores the questions of to whom we owe the truth and when, and what steps we may take when we should not give it.

Christopher O. Tollefsen is a professor of philosophy at the University of South Carolina. He has also been a visiting associate professor of politics and a Visiting Fellow in the James Madison Program at Princeton University. He serves on the editorial boards of *The Journal of Medicine and Philosophy* and *Christian Bioethics*. His most recent book is *Biomedical Research and Beyond: Expanding the Ethics of Inquiry* (2010).

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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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General Editor's Preface

In this new contribution to *New Studies in Christian Ethics*, Christopher O. Tollefsen makes a tightly argued and well thought-out claim that lying is never to be done, even for a good cause. Given that most of us tell lies on occasions, sometimes to protect other people but, regrettably, more often to protect ourselves, we are going to have to think long and hard if we are going to disagree intelligently with this challenging book. He combines the skills of both philosophy and theology and admirably fulfills the aims of the series, namely to promote monographs in Christian ethics that engage centrally with the present secular moral debate at the highest possible intellectual level and to encourage contributors to demonstrate that Christian ethics can make a distinctive contribution to this debate.

He is strongly committed to the absolutist position on lying taken by both Augustine and Aquinas. He also sides firmly with the moral absolutism, attack on proportionalism and consequentialism, and defense of natural law in Pope John Paul II's *Veritatis Splendor*. Tollefsen writes as a committed Catholic. However, he also includes sensitive accounts of John Cassian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Reinhold Niebuhr's non-absolutist accounts of lying – from which he finally dissents – in addition to the well-known absolutist position of Kant. He is dissatisfied with attempts either to define lying in a way that permits one to assert contrary to one's belief or to allow altruistic circumstances where lying is sanctioned or even encouraged.

He is well aware, however, that many of us find it difficult not to condone altruistic lying, and to his credit, he faces at length one of the most obvious examples of this, namely non-Jews in Nazi Germany sheltering persecuted Jews. The section titled "Nazis at the Door" provides an acute test for his absolutist position. Was it really wrong for these non-Jews to deny that they were sheltering Jews? Tollefsen offers a number of ingenious strategies that do not resort to lying but do involve, say, challenging

the Nazis about their right to have such information and insisting on their need to repent. He concludes simply that “Lying is not to be done, even to Nazis, for a good personal cause.”

Readers may or may not agree with this conclusion, but they will, I believe, be forced to think more clearly about what lying actually is and whether it is ever to be permitted. This is an important and well-sustained contribution both to Christian ethics and, more widely, to moral thought.

ROBIN GILL

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Various chapters of the book were read as papers, in whole or in part, at the following institutions: The University of St. Thomas, Yale University, The Franciscan University of Steubenville, The University of Udine, Princeton University, and The University of Scranton.

A first draft of the book was written while I was a Visiting Fellow of the James Madison Program at Princeton University. I am grateful to the university and the program for an altogether excellent year of intellectual companionship and stimulation. I have rarely worked so well as in my office in Bobst Hall. I am grateful as well to my own University of South Carolina, and to the Witherspoon Institute, for funding that made this year possible.

Glenn Gentry and Michael Dickson organized a reading group consisting of faculty and students from my university, and from Columbia International University, which read a penultimate draft of the book; regular participants included Craig Bacon, Brandon Boesch, Ron Childress, John Crutchfield, Jim Curley, Chip Edgar, George Khushf, and Michelle Panchuk. The discussions were lively, and their assistance was very helpful.

Although the material has undergone extensive development and maturation, the original idea for this book emerged out of three essays

published in the online journal *Public Discourse*, and a subsequent online controversy about the moral permissibility of lying for a good cause. I am very grateful for Ryan Anderson's encouragement both in writing those essays and in the subsequent discussions.

Chapter 3 would not exist but for the helpful proddings of a referee for Cambridge University Press and Robin Gill, and it would be far more deficient in its account of Bonhoeffer but for the help of Dan Williams and George Khushf.

My wife Laurie read an early draft of this book and made many helpful comments and suggestions; I made changes in response to almost every one of these, and the book is much better for her help. It is dedicated to her, and to my children, each of whom in their own way also contributed to its completion: Emma, Olaf, Abe, Alice, Joseph, Hilde, Mac, Leif, and Mariama.