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Christian Ethics in Secular Society (Book Review)

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Book Reviews

by Russell Maatman

Christian Ethics In Secular Society by Philip E. Hughes. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1983. 223 pp. Reviewed by Nick R. Van Til, Professor Emeritus of Philosophy.

Regular readers of Reformed books and periodicals will already be acquainted with Philip E. Hughes through previous works, for example, his *The Theology of the English Reformers*. This new volume by Hughes will form a valuable addition to any bookshelf that purports to reflect Reformed opinion.

While in one sense the book is theoretic as the author discusses the foundations of Christian and secular moral practice, at the same time he avoids the technical language which characterizes many discussions of ethical theory. For that reason Hughes' work provides a good layman's guide through the foundational ideas which distinguish Christian ethics and moral practice from that which can be characterized as non-Christian. Hughes sets the foundations of Christian ethics as derived from the Scriptures in sharp antithetical contrast to all those based on secular presuppositions. That antithetical flavor enhances the clarity of the presentation and thereby the value of the work.

This is not a "How to" book. It will not tell you what you must do in a specific situation. Rather, by uncovering the basic ideas which give impetus to various Christian and secular courses of action, it shows us which direction to take in making moral judgments. Some of the subjects which are covered include Conscience, Transactional Analysis, Sociobiology, Selfism, The New Morality, Capital Punishment, and many more.

Other students of ethics might differ with Hughes' absolutistic view of the place and function of conscience. He writes:

In no sense, then, can the conscience be treated as neutral or as subject to the accidents and contingencies of mortal existence. There is no situation in which a person is not required to love God and his neighbor. . . . Even apart from specific commands and prohibitions, the conscience is the voice of God telling man that certain things are wrong. (p. 31)

In the same place Hughes contends:

The function of conscience is not to will but (as the derivation of the term suggests) to know—in particular to know inwardly and instinctively that there is a difference between right and wrong, that what is in accordance with the will and character of God is right and what is discordant with the same is wrong, and that it is our duty and moral obligation to God and also to our fellow men, to do what is right and to reject what is wrong. (p. 31)

I think most will agree that the conscience, call it a faculty or inner voice, tells us that we must do the right and shun the wrong. But there is a great deal of disagreement as to what we can expect from our conscience as to specifics. Many students of ethics will maintain that while the conscience may tell us *that* we must choose the good and shun the evil, the conscience is not instinctively right as to *what* our choices must be in particular circumstances. Most will also argue that the conscience in what it offers by way of moral promptings is greatly affected by the "accidents and contingencies of moral existence."

Carl Henry in his *Christian Personal Ethics* maintains:

The Christian doctrine of sin involves also a certain depreciation of conscience. Although an inner witness to spiritual and moral truth, conscience is no longer revered as the veritable voice of God. Nor is it the authoritative and ultimate court of appeal in the discrimination of right and wrong.¹

Others make much of the unreliability of the "seared" conscience. Some neglect to mention the failures of the weak conscience. Hughes insists that the person with a weak conscience "should not prevail over the person

with a strong conscience" (p. 40). Subsequently, Hughes backs away from his earlier more absolutistic claims concerning the efficacy of conscience when he writes:

Even the regenerate conscience has much to learn and, in order to be liberated from the erroneous notions of his past, is in need of instruction in the revealed truth of God. The formation of conscience keeps step with the formation of one's understanding of the truth. (p. 41)

The above bears witness to the fact that the conscience is not innately reliable. Other writers also strongly emphasize that point. In answer to the question "Can a person really feel crushing disapproval yet be blameless before God?" James Dobson answers, "Categorically yes." He offers the example of parents who have guilt feelings concerning retarded or deformed children.²

Concerning the reliability of conscience, Lewis B. Smedes writes as follows:

Actually, conscience is easily led astray; it is like a computer that can be fed false data and print out elaborate tissues of lies. Conscience

may feel horrible when we are innocent as babes or splendid when we are guilty as Beelzebub. Conscience is by no means worthless, but left to its own devices, it is likely to pull the wool over our moral eyes.³

All those whom I have quoted agree that the conscience is in need of constant instruction from the Word. That they differ as to the extent of the efficacy of conscience attests its illusive nature, seemingly indefinable and indescribable. We should welcome not only Hughes' contribution to the discussion of conscience, but more generally the precise and specific way in which he sorts out Christian concepts of ethics and set them over against secular, that is, humanistic concepts.

Endnotes

¹ Carl F.H. Henry, *Christian Personal Ethics* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1957) p. 518.

² James Dobson, *Emotions: Can We Trust Them* (Ventura, Ca.: G/L Publications 1980) p. 21.

³ Lewis B. Smedes, *Mere Morality: What God Expects From Ordinary People* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1983) p. 25, Footnote 17.

Logic and the Nature of God, by Stephen T. Davis. Grand Rapids, Michigan, William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1983. 177 pages. Reviewed by Nick R. Van Til, Professor Emeritus of Philosophy.

By way of introducing this book I can do no better than to use a few paragraphs from the blurb on the book's jacket. They recommend this book as follows:

A discussion of the attributes of God, written from a Christian perspective, this book is theological in that it explores claims that have been made about God by Christian theologians, and in that it aims to produce a concept of God that is or ought to be satisfying to Christians. It is philosophical in both method and content—in method because Stephen Davis writes as a philosopher trained in philosophical analysis, and in content because much of its material is provided by arguments of past and present philosophers.

After a clear introduction, Davis devotes one chapter each to several divine attributes: eternity, omniscience, immutability, foreknowledge, omnipotence and benevolence. Succeeding chapters discuss the problem of evil and the doctrine of the Incarnation and Trinity.

Davis begins his treatment of the various attributes of God by discussing God's relationship to time. He concludes that on the basis of God's involvement in

creation and human history we cannot logically think of God as eternal, that is to say, timeless. Hence we are forced to the alternative conclusion that God is everlasting. Davis is convinced that such a view of God's relationship to time fits in better with a biblical view of other attributes of God as well.

Several chapters later in the discussion of the Trinity, Davis indicates that the use of logic cannot dispel all mystery concerning the being of God. For example, the doctrine of the Trinity is bound to escape logical explanation as we cannot reconcile the "one and many" problem as we find it suggested by the intrapersonal relationships of the one triune God of the Scriptures.

Davis admits that we do not find the doctrine of the Trinity clearly and forthrightly taught in unequivocal biblical statements. We have to infer the doctrine from various passages that seem to assume that God is three persons in one being. An outstanding example of the trinity is the great commission in Matthew 28:19, which refers to the three persons specifically, coming after Jesus' declarations that he and the Father are One.

What seems to be at issue in Davis' rationalizing God as everlasting and not eternal, while accepting the Trinity as a mystery, is the question of the criteria by which the one doctrine is judged to be logically deducible while the other remains logically a mystery.