

Preprint

Christian Ethics and Contemporary Moral Problems, Michael Banner, Cambridge University Press, 1999 (ISBN 0-521-62554-8), pp. xvi + 325, £13.95

This is a good collection of essays on Christian ethics; it aspires to be more than that, but falls short in its attempt to fulfil these higher aspirations. In five essays, Banner criticizes the contemporary practices of euthanasia and abortion, quality-of-life-calculations, the current conception of environmental ethics and the current debate on biotechnology; and in three more essays, he discusses the family and sexual ethics. As follows from this brief survey, Banner criticizes contemporary debates rather than contributing to them; however, the essays satisfy high standards and Banner's comments are mostly insightful. There is much to be learnt from several of the essays – also by those who are interested in philosophical ethics rather than in Christian ethics. The positions he defends are rather orthodox, and have solid grounding in the Christian tradition, especially in the theology of Karl Barth. Following Barth, Banner takes it to be his task to 'proclaim ... in each and every sphere of human life the liberation of that sphere by the liberating action of God in Christ' (46), and he performs this task in a distinctive, erudite way. That accounts for my claim that this is a good collection of essays. Banner himself, however, aspires for higher distinction – especially in the Preface and in the Introduction, his inaugural lecture at King's College London. He starts by recounting Alasdair MacIntyre's story about the companions of Captain Cook, who were quite unable to understand the morals of the people of Polynesia. And because they did not understand their morals, they started asking questions about them – with the result that they crumbled away in the time of a generation. The explanation given is that the morals had still been there, without the Polynesians remembering their rationale; and the story is told as a parable about our own moral situation. Banner paints the state of contemporary ethics in the blackest colors. If the reader doubts that things are quite as bleak as he claims, he suggests: 'I can only suppose that he or she has been spared that important rite of intellectual passage, becoming a reviewer of books. Of course, there are other experiences which might bring one to one's senses as regards the state of contemporary moral discourse, but amongst those on offer book reviewing has the virtue (for those who dive rather than edge into bodies of cold water), of accomplishing the immersion with a certain rapidity. For, if one is to review honestly, and not simply for the sake of enlarging one's circle of friends, one has to face rather directly a question as to the merits of the book in hand' (xi). After this critical start I was disappointed to find Banner embracing a thoroughly postmodern view of ethics, which not only makes ethics tradition-dependent, but also accepts that moral traditions are in principle *incapable* of showing their own argumentative superiority to their rivals (43). If that would be true, Christian ethics could still be practiced, but never be justified – it would itself be without rationale. Without such a justification, one can still make pertinent criticisms of weaknesses in contemporary debates (and Banner's criticisms certainly are valuable), but one will not be able to *argue* for one's alternative. Instead, one has to be content with *proclaiming* it. Reviewing honestly, and not for the sake of making friends, I conclude that this book is strong in practice, but weak in fundamentals.

Marcel Sarot