

Book Reviews

BIBLICAL ETHICS: TWO VIEWS

The First View

Biblical v. Secular Ethics is edited by R. Joseph Hoffman and Gerald A. Larue and is published by Prometheus Books, NY, 1988. The book is composed of papers read at the Second International Symposium of the Committee for the Scientific Examination of Religion (CSER) in 1986. CSER is a committee associated with *Free Inquiry* magazine, a secular humanist publication. There are fifteen essays in the book produced under the auspices of CSER's Biblical Criticism Research Project. The book is edited by Joseph Hoffman, Senior Lecturer in the Division of History of Christianity at La Trobe University (Australia), and Gerald Larue, Professor Emeritus of Archaeology and Biblical History at the University of Southern California and Chairman of CSER.

Before making a few comments on some of the essays, some remarks on the book's preface, introduction, and epilogue are in order.

The preface is written by Joseph Hoffman. In it he concedes that the Bible has played an important role in human actions in the past for Western culture, but that the Bible's moral world view is obsolete, that it belongs to the period of the ancient Near East, that "biblical ethics are irrelevant, or potentially irrelevant, in making the hard moral choices that 'modern' society demands of its members" (p. 9). The Bible's "passing from the scene" has been accompanied by its abuse at the hands of fundamentalists, who, he says, have used it as "a hammer for political views, denominational moral dicta, and religious propaganda" (p. 8). He says that fundamentalism's abusive literal reading of the Bible and thoughtless invocation of it to settle moral questions has been the Bible's "deathblow" (p. 8). Near the end of the preface, however, he says that this seemingly "unfriendly thesis" does "not entail the notion that the Bible has nothing to say about ethics. On the contrary, what it has to say may inspire fruitful reflection and even more humane solutions than the

ancient text itself proposes" (p. 9). Despite this conciliatory sounding note, most of the authors in the book reject the Bible as a work of revelation and criticize fundamentalism's attempts to apply the Bible's ethical principles to modern life.

In fact, the derisive rhetoric in Larue's introduction and Paul Kurtz's epilogue is aimed at Christian fundamentalists, not all Christians (pp. 12-13, 190). Hence the word "Biblical" in the book's title "Biblical Ethics" is construed by them to mean "Fundamentalist Biblical Ethics." Hoffman, Larue and Kurtz are primarily upset with the way fundamentalists have used the Bible as a political tool in an uncritical and unphilosophic way, while ignoring what secular ethics can contribute to today's decision-making. Thus most of the writers have as their goal to show that the fundamentalist interpretation and biblical literalism are unsatisfactory ethical bases. This is why most of the contributors spend time showing how the Bible's stories are: (a) bad ethical examples; (b) rooted in irrelevant Semitic situations of the Ancient world; or (c) contradictory.

The first essay in the book, "Biblical Ethics and Continuing Interpretation," is written by Larue, and is an example of strategy (b). Larue clearly believes in the "document hypothesis" of the so-called "higher criticism," and this to the extent that the Bible, he says, has "no more divinity or sacred authority than any other writings from the same time and period. Both Jewish and Christian scriptures are human products that have been declared 'divine' by human councils" (p. 23). By describing how the Bible has been put together and interpreted in the Jewish and Christian traditions, it would seem that he wants to show that the Bible has never been taken literally. He believes that the Old and New Testaments are just "a compendium of human writings reflecting the ethical concepts of small groups of people living in a remote corner of the ancient, Near Eastern world" (p. 22). Consequently, it would be folly to use biblical ethical concepts in twentieth century America—as various fundamentalistic Christians have tried to do.

Hoffman's essay on "The Moral Rhetoric of the Gospels," Rivkin's essay on "Building a Biblical Foundation for Contemporary Ethics," and Barnhart's essay on "The Relativity of Biblical Ethics" also employ strategy (b) in much the same way, although the tone of the other

contributions is less peevish. Their views are summed up accurately in these sentences written by Barnhart:

I criticize those theologians who tell people that biblical ethics advances moral absolutes. In fact, so-called biblical ethics is situation ethics that often sets itself up as immutable divine decree. The unfortunate consequence of this tactic is that moral positions taken in the Bible are denied the useful process of criticism and refinement, a process that is essential if ethics is to escape the brutalizing effects of dogmatism (p. 114).

In his essay "Change and the Changeless" John F. Priest (Ch., Dept. of Religion, Florida State U.) also encourages a historical-critical view of the Bible. He uses strategies (b) and (c). His purpose is to draw attention to "clear evidences of change and contradiction" within biblical ethical practices and rules (p. 37). Again, he is making a case against a literalistic inerrancy approach to the Bible, which claims that timeless, changeless, ethical principles may be lifted from the Bible and applied to contemporary life. He is more balanced than some other authors in his position on the use of the Bible as a source for ethics. He faults many secular humanists for regarding the Bible as a document that gives "no counsel or guidance to the contemporary scene" (p. 44). His hope is that the historical study of the Bible can correct, or at least modify, both the erroneous fundamentalist and humanist positions.

Other essays in the book, such as "The Bible and Anti-Semitism" and "On Slavery" use strategy (a), that is, they try to make the point that the Bible cannot be used as a literal guide to ethics because of the bad examples that various biblical figures set and the kind of (now immoral) actions that the Bible condones (such as anti-semitism and slavery).

There are two essays which deviate from the others in that they are somewhat critical of the humanist's approach to the Bible and religion. Theodor Gaster in "Secular Humanism and the Bible" criticizes secular humanism for failing to "realize that its objections are basically esthetic, not philosophical. It is really objecting to the ideological idiom of the biblical writers, which it takes literally" (p. 35). Many of this journal's readers, however, will consider Gaster's theological views too liberal to make this criticism stick. In the other essay, "Reason and Ethics" by Joseph Fletcher (of *Situational Ethics* fame), the amusing (but sad) recommendation is made: "I also hope that they will define their position

as humanists,... avoiding any appearance of putting people in the place that God has in religious beliefs and religious heads. In short, humanist idolatry is as silly as theist idolatry, and arguably even sillier" (p. 187).

As a friend recently said, Ideas can hurt people, and the idea that the Bible is no longer useful in making ethical decisions, that it is merely a compendium of human writings, and that it received its "deathblow" from fundamentalism can hurt a sensitive religious reader. Yet reading such a book encourages a Christian to reflect upon his use of the Bible as a source for ethics, his hermeneutical stance, and the best way to reply to such ideas. We may agree with the secular humanists' view that certain fundamentalists are using the Bible in an uneducated and politically dangerous way, but if we disagree with the humanists' other views and sentiments then a reply is certainly in order; if not as an evangelization attempt to this group of humanists, then as an exercise in knowing just what our position is so that people's faith may be strengthened.

The Second View

Written from a Christian perspective is a book by Arthur F. Holmes (Ch., Dept. of Phil., Wheaton College) entitled *Ethics, Approaching Moral Decisions*. It was published in 1984 by Inter Varsity Press and is another volume in the "Contours of Christian Philosophy" series. Holmes' approach to biblical and secular ethics is much more balanced than Larue and Hoffman's. Holmes discusses a number of issues, ranging from theoretical concerns such as relativism, egoism, moral knowledge and human rights, to more practical concerns such as criminal punishment, legislating morality, virtue, and the ethics of sex and marriage. And he does this with clarity, patiently explaining arguments and positions while being fair and unpatronizing. In the Christian ethic he develops, moral obligation has a Divine basis, love and justice are the two ethical principles, and the ten commandments are moral rules.

However, despite the many fascinating things that Holmes says about many issues in ethics and the exciting Christian perspective he develops, the point I wish to focus upon is the way he views biblical and secular ethics. If we were to think of fundamentalists and secular humanists as two extremes on a continuum, Holmes would be in the middle, a most sensible place to be, since he can acknowledge the legitimate criticisms of

the humanists while remaining steadfastly a Christian, that is, a Christian who does not believe that biblical ethics are irrelevant or that the Bible has "passed from the scene." Let me demonstrate what I mean.

Holmes begins by saying that *two* questions face us: What can biblical morality contribute to ethics? and, What can ethics contribute to biblical Christianity? (p. 11) Answers to *both* questions are important. Since he knows that his readers are probably Christians, he addresses the latter question first. He can hear a Christian asking: "If I practice love, what else can philosophical ethics contribute? Isn't the Bible alone sufficient? Might not anything further muddy the waters? Might it not lead us away from true paths of righteous living?" (p. 11) He answers this first query by saying that love alone does not tell us what we ought to want and ought to do in every kind of situation; "it still needs (and surely wants) instruction in righteousness. . . ." "If I need and want more explicit moral guidance than liberty and love alone provide, then I will use every resource which God provides" (p. 13). He goes on to say that Scripture is not God's only revelation of Himself and His will. The first three chapters of Romans are quite explicit that we are accountable for a general revelation in creation itself, "and the Christian can rightly regard philosophical ethics as an attempt to understand that general revelation" (p. 13).

Two clarifications need to be made here. One is that Holmes does not think that creation proves each jot in God's moral law. "The biblical direction is rather that creation *bears witness* to the moral law, that creational indicators point to good ends God intended in making us [and the world] as he did. . ." (p. 63).¹ The other clarification that needs to be

¹ Holmes thinks that the concept of moral law written into our nature as human beings is theologically attractive because "This is an ordered creation, . . . and it is ordered with a view to God's purposes in creating as he did. What he created is good, and the ends for which he created are also good. . . . Equally telling, perhaps more so, are some biblical indications of this" (p. 63). He then refers to such passages as Genesis 1:26-31; 2:18-25; 4:8-16; 9:1-6; Matthew 19:4-12; Mark 7:18-23; and I Timothy 4:1-5 (p. 63). Two passages that he could have listed which I think are even clearer indicators are Psalm 33:5 "the earth is full of the steadfast love of the Lord" and Psalm 19:1-2 "The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge." At any rate, I think that his intention to establish his point biblically is a good one because that is a crucial point to make—for the humanists' sake as well as ours. After all, we depend upon the Bible for our Christianity and it won't do us much good in this instance to "retreat to the internal sense" (to borrow a phrase from Paul Vickers).

made is that Holmes does not think that *all* philosophical ethics would qualify as an attempt to understand that "general revelation" in creation. I am sure that he sees part of philosophical ethics as the rationalizing of the merely natural man's selfish desires. What he particularly seems to have in mind here is a phenomenological ethics which describes universal aspects of human existence (cf. p. 65).

He answers the second query (Isn't the Bible alone sufficient for ethics?) by saying just what some of the secular humanists say about the Bible: the Bible gives us a lot of ethical material in different literary forms and from different historical and cultural contexts (p. 12); the Bible is silent about many moral problems we face today (pp. 12, 76); and it does not automatically resolve moral dilemmas (p. 76). "Some writers treat divine command theories as theories about moral knowledge, implying that we are confined to what the Bible says or to special experiences of divine guidance. Not so" (p. 75). Both secular humanists and fundamentalists need to wake up to this statement.

Moreover, he agrees with the secular humanists that we do *not* face moral disaster or anarchy without a biblical basis for morality, as the fundamentalists assert. He says there are two responses to the "prophets of moral gloom" (p. 77). One is that where no divinely imposed ethic is acknowledged, other bases of obligation are created.

The 'ought' is either socially imposed or self-imposed (and these become pseudo-religious bases, as in Marxism or secular humanism [!]), or else some non-Christian religion takes over this role. These bases may be philosophically insufficient, as we have argued. . . . But neither of these considerations forces people to abandon all sense of 'ought'. The irony is that the merciful providence of God makes even mistaken views of ethical

Yet the Writings do, I think, make the same point when they say that "Human reason can, if it will, perceive and be convinced, from many things in the world, that there is a God, and that He is one. This truth may be confirmed by innumerable things in the visible world; for the universe is like a stage, upon which evidences [or "testimonies" in another trans.] that there is a God and that He is one are continually exhibited." (TCR 12) There are also a number of passages in the Arcana which say the same thing: The universe is a kind of theatre representative of the glory of the Lord..." (AC 3000); "The universe is a theatre representative of the Lord's kingdom; and this is a theatre representative of the Lord Himself." (AC 3483); "Hence it is that the universal visible world is a theatre representative of the Spiritual World" (AC 5173:2). Other Arcana references include: 2989-3000; 3648; 3942; 4318; 4409; 4489:3; 4844:17; 4939; 5116:2; 5704:2 et al.

obligation serve some of his moral ends. Moral anarchy does not necessarily result from nontheistic belief, though logically it might (p. 77).

The other response one can make is to show that there is a pervasive historical connection in the West to the Judeo-Christian heritage that has influenced social institutions and legal systems. There is also an "epistemological connection, for if the law of God is attested by essential structures of human nature,... then these factors are likely to influence the ethical thinking and moral decisions even of those who do not acknowledge the Creator" (p. 78).

As for the third query (Won't philosophical secular ethics muddy the waters or lead us away from the true path of righteous living?), Holmes advises Christians that they should be "wary of any moral consensus of an ungodly society in a fallen world" (p. 58).

What I hope to have shown so far is that Holmes acknowledges the concerns and insights of secular humanists when it comes to biblical ethics. The number of statements of the kind quoted above, however, is *few* in comparison to the number of statements that show how secular ethics is incomplete, leads to dead ends, and is philosophically flawed. Indeed, this is the point of the whole book: to demonstrate the ways in which various secular ethics are philosophically insufficient and problematic while showing how a Christian ethic is philosophically sufficient and overcomes many problems. Hence the carefully articulated and potent critiques of cultural relativism in chapter two, emotivist ethics in chapter three, ethical egoism in chapter four, and utilitarianism in chapter five. Besides these, Holmes addresses other kinds of ethics that secular humanists like Larue, Hoffman, and Fletcher often adopt.

Situation-ethics or act-ethics is one example. The moral rules of a Christian ethic require kinds of activities in areas of life. Some humanists reject a rule-ethic and instead adopt a situation or act-ethic. With these prefatory remarks, I will let Holmes speak for himself by quoting at length:

Rules for them are, at best, rules of thumb, behavior patterns based on past experiences; and we are not at all obligated to follow them. Situation ethics is an act-theory in that it treats each situation on its own merits and shuns moral rules as a form of legalism. An act-ethic presupposes that no universal and lasting structures to human life exist, that there are no

distinguishable areas of unchanging responsibility, no actions spheres we all have in common. But Christian belief in a divinely ordered creation argues otherwise, and theologians speak variously of creation's order, law spheres and creation mandates. The point is that humans are generically alike and share a common world, that we have common needs and common activities. . . . Situations do not differ so widely as the situationist supposes, nor do acts differ so greatly as the act-ethicist assumes.² Moral rules for common areas are therefore not only possible but also extremely valuable in guiding life wisely and well. A Christian ethic especially, . . . will be a rule-ethic. Nor is this the legalism which situationists fear. Legalism binds the conscience to manmade rules for every possible situation, imposing a rule for every case. It hides the weightier matters of the law, the underlying principles of love and justice, beneath a load of particular behavioral requirements. It elevates its rules to the level of exceptionless principles. But not so a Christian rule-ethic (pp. 53-4).

Indeed, this was precisely why the Lord chastised the scribes and Pharisees (Matt 23:23).

Another example of an alternative ethic that Holmes critiques might be called the "moral wisdom of a culture" ethic. He recognizes that this theory does offer "a great deal of lasting value" since it has been forged and refined over the course of time amid varied circumstances in the heat of the universal human condition (p. 58). Similar moral concerns have also been noted in cultures with vastly different histories. But problems arise. The first concerns the extent of such common morality, for it tends to deal with cases and common areas of life as they have been in the past; hence there is a limited array of things in any case. This lacks overall principles from which moral dilemmas and novel moral issues might be addressed. In essence, this is the same criticism that the humanists make when fundamentalists attempt to apply old Near-Eastern cases to today's dilemmas. Holmes asks, "Is piecemeal wisdom a broad enough basis for a comprehensive ethic?"

² Although Holmes does not give a reference here to bolster his argument, I suspect that he has in mind a study like *Christianity in Culture* by Charles H. Kraft, Orbis Books, NY., 1979, which discusses human commonality and non-relative functions and needs (see especially p. 91). Perhaps he also thinks that the situation/ act-ethicists have ignored much of what contemporary sociology has said about the structures of human existence.

The second problem concerns the finality of common morality: if it has been accumulating over the years, then presumably the process continues, with changes that track the changing moral climate. Now "historical and cultural relativism rears its head" with all of their accompanying practical problems and logical confusions (p. 58).

A final example that Holmes discusses is intuitionism. Briefly, intuitionism suffers from three problems: 1. the term "moral intuition" is sufficiently unclear that many different things may pass for moral intuitions; 2. this leads to radical differences among people's intuitions and hence incommensurable ethical theories; and 3. we are not told by intuitionists what makes the good good and the right right—are we to just trust them blindly? (cf.p. 60)

Remember that Holmes has pointed out the faults of these bases *in addition* to the weaknesses of the more sophisticated theories of emotivism, egoism, and utilitarianism. I simply do not have the time to show you how all of this adds up to a compelling demonstration of the need for a Christian biblical ethic and then his explanation of that ethic.

In conclusion, I recommend that interested readers take a look at both books, since one provides such a contrast to the other that the subject takes on a new clarity. In addition, the reader will get a more complete idea of what a Christian ethic is than the bare outline that I gave in this article.

Dan A. Synnестvedt
Academy of the New Church College
Bryn Athyn
PA 19009

Statement of Ownership, Management and Circulation

(Act of August 12, 1970; Section 3685, Title 39, United States Code)

<p>1. Title of publication: The New Philosophy.</p> <p>2. Date of filing: October 1, 1982.</p> <p>3. Frequency of issue: Quarterly.</p> <p>4. Location of known office of publication. P.O. Box 11, Bryn Athyn, PA 19009.</p> <p>5. Location of headquarters or general offices of the publishers. P.O. Box 11, Bryn Athyn, PA 19009.</p> <p>6. Names and addresses of Publisher, Editor and Managing Editor: Publisher: Swedenborg Scientific Association, P.O. Box 11, Bryn Athyn, PA 19009. Editor: Erland J. Brock, P.O. Box 278, Bryn Athyn, PA 19009. Managing Editor: E. Boyd Asplundh, P.O. Box 11, Bryn Athyn, PA 19009.</p> <p>7. Owner: Swedenborg Scientific Association, P.O. Box 11, Bryn Athyn, PA 19009 (Nonprofit corporation).</p> <p>8. Known bondholders, mortgages, and other security holders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages or other securities. None.</p> <p>9. The purpose, function and nonprofit status of this organization and the exempt status for Federal Income Tax purposes have not changed during the preceding 12 months.</p> <p>10. Extent and nature of circulation.</p>	<table border="0" style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr> <td style="width: 50%;"></td> <td style="width: 25%; text-align: right;">Average No. Copies</td> <td style="width: 25%; text-align: right;">Single Issue</td> </tr> <tr> <td></td> <td style="text-align: right;">Each Issue</td> <td style="text-align: right;">During Nearest</td> </tr> <tr> <td></td> <td style="text-align: right;">Preceding 12 Mos.</td> <td style="text-align: right;">Filing Date</td> </tr> </table> <table border="0" style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr> <td style="width: 50%;"></td> <td style="width: 25%; text-align: right;">525</td> <td style="width: 25%;"></td> </tr> <tr> <td>A. Total no. copies printed (Net press run)</td> <td></td> <td style="text-align: right;">550</td> </tr> <tr> <td>B. Paid circulation</td> <td></td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td> 1. Sales through dealers and carriers, street vendors and counter sales</td> <td></td> <td style="text-align: right;">None</td> </tr> <tr> <td> 2. Mail</td> <td style="text-align: right;">subscriptions</td> <td style="text-align: right;">400</td> </tr> <tr> <td>C Total paid circulation</td> <td></td> <td style="text-align: right;">400</td> </tr> <tr> <td>D. Free distribution by mail, carrier or other.</td> <td></td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td> 1. Samples, complimentary and other free copies</td> <td></td> <td style="text-align: right;">87</td> </tr> <tr> <td> 2. Copies distributed to news agents, but not sold.</td> <td></td> <td style="text-align: right;">None</td> </tr> <tr> <td>E. Total distribution (Sum of C & D)</td> <td></td> <td style="text-align: right;">467</td> </tr> <tr> <td>F. Office use, leftover, unaccounted, spoiled printing</td> <td style="text-align: right;">after</td> <td style="text-align: right;">63</td> </tr> <tr> <td>G. Total (Sum of E & F—should equal net press run shown in A)</td> <td style="text-align: right;">525</td> <td style="text-align: right;">550</td> </tr> </table> <p>I certify that the statements made by me above are correct and complete.</p>		Average No. Copies	Single Issue		Each Issue	During Nearest		Preceding 12 Mos.	Filing Date		525		A. Total no. copies printed (Net press run)		550	B. Paid circulation			1. Sales through dealers and carriers, street vendors and counter sales		None	2. Mail	subscriptions	400	C Total paid circulation		400	D. Free distribution by mail, carrier or other.			1. Samples, complimentary and other free copies		87	2. Copies distributed to news agents, but not sold.		None	E. Total distribution (Sum of C & D)		467	F. Office use, leftover, unaccounted, spoiled printing	after	63	G. Total (Sum of E & F—should equal net press run shown in A)	525	550
	Average No. Copies	Single Issue																																												
	Each Issue	During Nearest																																												
	Preceding 12 Mos.	Filing Date																																												
	525																																													
A. Total no. copies printed (Net press run)		550																																												
B. Paid circulation																																														
1. Sales through dealers and carriers, street vendors and counter sales		None																																												
2. Mail	subscriptions	400																																												
C Total paid circulation		400																																												
D. Free distribution by mail, carrier or other.																																														
1. Samples, complimentary and other free copies		87																																												
2. Copies distributed to news agents, but not sold.		None																																												
E. Total distribution (Sum of C & D)		467																																												
F. Office use, leftover, unaccounted, spoiled printing	after	63																																												
G. Total (Sum of E & F—should equal net press run shown in A)	525	550																																												

E. Boyd Asplundh, *Managing Editor*

TOUR OF SWEDENBORG'S SWEDEN

The itinerary for the second tour of Swedenborg's Sweden, scheduled for July 25th to August 6th, 1990, is now available.

Learn about Swedenborg's life and his environment by seeing the places he lived, studied, and worked. Travel through Sweden's glorious countryside, become acquainted with its charming customs, and meet the growing group of Swedish friends.

Contact Martha Gyllenhaal (215-947-7046), Carroll or Durban Odhner (215-938-2547 or 947-5085). Places are limited, and sign up deadline is Christmas time.

REMINDER

Annual membership and subscription dues are requested by Dec. 31st, 1989.