

CHRISTIAN SOCIAL THOUGHT

Choosing the Good: Christian Ethics in a Complex World

Dennis P. Hollinger

Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 2002 (299 pages)

In the preface to this book, Dennis Hollinger states two aims: (a) to survey “essential issues” and (b) to suggest a particular approach to Christian ethics (7).

In his introduction, he helpfully distinguishes ethics from moral life: Ethics is “the discipline that studies the moral life” (14); moral life is the behavior (13). He claims that this book “explores” both (23), but, as the subtitle indicates, the book seems mainly to be about “Christian ethics” as a discipline rather than how to live. As such, it is a work of metaethics—that is, a reflection on ethics. In keeping with its first aim, it is a “textbook” (7) rather than a scholarly investigation. Accordingly, this review will consider the book primarily with respect to its pedagogical value.

Choosing the Good has four parts, dealing with, respectively, foundations, contexts, decision making, and application. The first part surveys consequentialism (emphasis on results) and deontology (emphasis on duty and principle), as long-standing foundations for ethics. Finding them wanting, Hollinger looks to virtue ethics (emphasis on character) as an improvement but finally proposes a “Christian Worldview” as the most adequate foundation, since the Triune God revealed in creation, history, and Scripture is the ultimate basis for moral guidance in this approach.

Hollinger describes his second part as “primarily sociological” (88). Steering a midcourse between an absolutism that would recognize no role in ethics for context and a relativism that regards context as “determinative,” he assumes that context mediates between “transcendent” foundations and “moral universals” on the one hand,

and our understanding and application of those norms on the other (87). “The context of our times is now clearly a postmodern one, though much of modernity continues” (123). Accordingly, he assesses the benefits and “concerns” of doing Christian ethics in a postmodern context that still bears many marks of modernity.

The third part is methodological, but Hollinger insists that the method of making ethical decisions is “actually rooted in a larger narrative or worldview” (123). So, after developing a threefold typology based on the work of Edward L. Long, he discusses the use of the Bible as well as the role of experience in how a Christian is to make ethical decisions. The three typical “motifs” or methods are deliberative, prescriptive, and relational. Assessing the strengths and weaknesses of each motif, he concludes, “All three have a place in making ethical decisions but within a priority of modified prescriptivism” (147); thus, he favors the second. Yet the Bible should not be used simplistically in supplying prescriptions, since “Scripture ... was written in particular cultural and historical contexts,” and we have the “hermeneutical task” of moving “from then to now with integrity and openness to biblical guidance” (173).

Hollinger is similarly balanced and cautious about the role of experience in determining ethically relevant facts: “We need to be aware of the social mores, ideologies, vested interests, and personal dispositions that tend to inform our empirical judgments in ways that distort our understanding of the reality surrounding an issue.” Even so, “there is a reality within the world that can be grasped (in part) by all human beings if they seek it with integrity, self-awareness, and a bracketing of their own biases” (186). He thus seeks to salvage both the Bible and “our pursuit of truth” from the destructive effects of modern and postmodern skepticism, while acknowledging some validity in that skepticism.

The fourth part seems to be the reverse of the second part. While the first considered the influence of modernity and postmodernity on Christian ethics, the last discusses how Christian ethics should influence society and culture. As in the third part, Hollinger begins with a typology, this time drawing on H. Richard Niebuhr. He thus delineates five approaches, after which he suggests a sixth, summarized in the motto, “Christ in but not of culture” (214). He goes on to apply this approach to questions of justice and pluralism. The concluding chapter outlines nine “models” or “strategies” (257) for “connecting a transcultural ethic with the cultures and societies in which we find ourselves” (272). Wise use of these strategies will vary with (a) the context, (b) the issue, and (c) “one’s Christ-culture stance” (269) among the six approaches he typified earlier.

Hollinger’s use of typologies is a key feature of the book. It is both a strength and a weakness. It helps him to survey an impressive number of authors (more than two hundred) and to organize his material with a clear structure. Insofar as this book is intended as a textbook, this clarity, organization, and structure are pedagogical virtues. He, himself, though, frequently acknowledges the limitations of typology. Many, if not most, of the authors he discusses do not fit very well into the types, so the question presents itself: Why study individual authors at all? If general types, tendencies, motifs,

or models are the essential content, might it be better to focus on those general features rather than on individuals whose thought is too complex to pigeonhole so summarily? Hollinger might reply that individuals, particularly impressive writers such as Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, and Calvin, serve to illustrate the types more memorably and more concretely than abstract generalities would. Yet Hollinger also uses vivid, well-presented stories or cases, often from his own experience, to introduce topics and problems. These are very effective in capturing the reader's imagination. I suggest that replacing the authors with stories, even if fictional, would illustrate the types without the dangers of distortion and over-simplification.

To demonstrate the problem to which I refer, I offer the following example, which is Hollinger's illustration of the deliberative motif (the first of Long's three types).

For some Christians, reason is the source of moral judgments, and Christian ethics is "subsumed under the rubrics of philosophy." For others, reason and philosophical reflection are employed to serve theological commitments. "In the first, a rationally autonomous philosophy is the master of Christian judgment; in the second, moral philosophy is *the* [my emphasis] tool of Christian ethics." The first form has been most prominent in Roman Catholic moral theology, while the second form is found among assorted Protestant thinkers (128, citing Long).

Hollinger then cites two authors—Thomas Aquinas, as the representative of "the classic Roman Catholic Tradition" (129) and Richard McCormick, as a "more contemporary" representative (132). Although Pope Pius XII is also quoted as an example of "traditional Roman Catholic thought" (131f.), as well as the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace later in the book (262), no explicit distinction is made between the Magisterium (official Catholic teaching) and individual theologians. For a Catholic Christian, "the obedience of faith" to divine revelation and "religious assent" to the other teachings of the Magisterium are essential for ethical decision making (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nn. 891–892). The opinion of no theologian, not even Aquinas, has this standing.

So Hollinger misrepresents the Catholic position when he writes, "Aquinas's use of natural law became a mainstay in Roman Catholic moral theology. *All* moral decisions could be made on the basis of reason ... " (131, my emphasis). The first sentence is true, but the second is false.

In context, this seems to be a momentary lapse, however, since on the same page, two paragraphs earlier, he says that for Aquinas divine law "*constitutes the* portion of God's designs and truth that cannot be known by reason or natural law" but also that "divine law encompasses some things that are known by reason" (my emphasis). If we substitute "includes a" for the italicized phrase, the contradiction is resolved, and the Catholic position is correctly stated.

Hollinger's purpose here is not a scholarly exposition of Aquinas or Catholicism but an illustration of "deliberative" ethical decision making based on reason alone. Because distorting actual authors or traditions to fit his typologies occasions such lapses, however, he would do better to omit the references.

I have already praised this book for its clarity, organization, and structure, as well as for its use of stories and cases. Even though I object to its use of some of its sources, there is a wealth of bibliographical information here. Such information would be more helpful if it were collected into an explicit bibliography instead of scattered about the endnotes and the index (which is thorough and useful). Typographical errors are rare, and the running heads are helpful. Both parts and chapters are introduced in the manner of Aquinas with a clear explanation of the logic for the divisions and topics. There is a recurring structure of survey, evaluation, and conclusion, including strengths and weaknesses of the various positions. All these features make this an easy text to study and a useful roadmap for exploring a complex field.

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**Habits of the High-Tech Heart:
Living Virtuously in the Information Age**
Quentin Schultze

Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2002 (256 pages)

Much like the work of Robert Bellah, et al., which its title evokes, Quentin Schultze's *Habits of the High-Tech Heart* offers a strong critique of trends in contemporary culture that threaten to undermine the deeper, more noble capacities of the human spirit. Harkening, as Bellah did, to de Tocqueville's observation on the significance of "habits of the heart" cultivated in community, Schultze proposes six virtuous habits to counter the particular moral challenges that we face in the twenty-first century.

As a professor of Communications at Calvin College and author of several works on high-tech communications media (*Internet for Christians*; co-author of *Dancing in the Dark: Youth, Popular Culture, and the Electronic Media*), Schultze focuses his critical eye on modern information technologies and the cyberculture that they generate. While he affirms that "there is much worth celebrating" in the cyber-world, Schultze devotes most of his analysis to the more troubling aspects of the Information Age.

The reasons for this approach become clear as Schultze sets about the task of identifying the specific moral challenges that confront us. First priority is given to "informationism," our pseudo-religious faith in the power of information technologies to solve global problems and to bring us into a new era of high-tech happiness.

Not only are information technologies incapable of ushering in this utopia, Schultze insists; they are quite capable of generating a cyber-driven dystopia. Cyberculture, as the author paints it, is shallow and vacuous, bereft of the transcendental realities of Truth, Beauty, and Goodness. Instead, the world created by high-tech information systems is filled with ... *information*.

Data. Facts. Current events. Consumer trends. Late-breaking news. The world Schultze describes is filled with all things measurable but without meaning; these things represent the sheer facticity of life without the moral weight of oughtness. The