

Review Article

Whatever Happened to Ethics?

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Harry Huebner, David Schroeder, *Church as Parable: Whatever Happened to Ethics?* (Winnipeg: CMBC Publications, 1993)
236pp.

In this important work, Harry Huebner and David Schroeder, long-time teachers together at the Canadian Mennonite Bible College in Winnipeg, call the church to recover a sense of a moral community, a community of character and virtue, embodying the character of God as expressed in Jesus. Their basic thesis is that moderns have forgotten how to be ethical, having abandoned adherence to the will of God in favour of their own personal values, tastes, and preferences. In the authors' view that amounts to an abandonment of ethics. The solution is to be found in a recovery of identity, an identity shaped by the biblical "story of Israel and Jesus." This identity is to be shaped by discipline and training of character through the practice of the virtues which come to expression in the biblical story. Huebner and Schroeder elaborate this thesis in ten chapters (six by Huebner and four by Schroeder) under five rubrics: Loss and Temptation, Foundations for Christian Living, Remembering the Biblical Story, The Good Life, and Being in This World.

In Section I ("Loss and Temptation"), in chapters entitled "A Rumour of Ethics" and "Christian Ethics as Art?," Huebner, drawing on the work of Alisdair MacIntyre, characterizes the modern age as essentially amoral—

immanentist, individualistic, emotivistic, psychological, political, and relativistic—the inevitable fruits of the Enlightenment and modernism. Urgently needed is a “language” which enables people to live and act with a sense of the presence of the transcendent God, the only true ground for goodness, and thus the only real foundation for ethics. Huebner returns to this more theoretical discussion toward the end of the book (chap. 8, “A Community of Virtues”) with a discussion of virtues as practiced by a community of character living by and within the biblical story. He finds these in the list of fruits of the spirit in Galatians 5:22.

Appropriately, Schroeder moves in chapter 3 (“Revelation: Learning to Know God”) to a discussion of revelation which, again contrary to modern understandings, presupposes the presence or “thereness” of God. Revelation means acting on the “promise” of God as verified in human experience. It is this which gives birth to “story,” a central category in both authors’ thinking. One might wonder, parenthetically, whether the prominence Schroeder gives to human experience in the verification process of revelation does not open the door to precisely the subjectivism Huebner decries in the first several chapters.

In chapter 4 (“How Can Ethics Be Christian?”), Huebner intends to guard against a possible misunderstanding that Schroeder and he want to turn back the clock to the pre-Enlightenment period. He appeals to George Lindbeck’s “cultural linguistic” model of truth perception and articulation in order to make the point that the community—the church—which shares a language becomes the content of the ethic. The church does not *have* an ethic, it *is* an ethic, as the authors like to put it repeatedly (e.g., 66; cf. 180). In contrast to situationism (Fletcher’s love ethic), decisionism (existentialist “ethics”), individualism (focused on rights), and act-oriented ethics, the *church* must be itself the category of meaning for ethics, with the stress on *being* rather than motivation or act. The church is a “storied” community, trained in doing the good as defined and shaped by that story.

In Section III, “Remembering the Biblical Story,” Schroeder rehearses the biblical story in chapter 5 (“Creation: In God’s Image”). What is perhaps most indicative of the orientation of these authors is that the story is told without the violence of either liberation or judgment usually seen as an integral part of that story. The central categories in Schroeder’s retelling are God’s mercy and forgiveness, coming to full and clear expression in Jesus. It is the authors’ conviction that to remember the story in this way will forge an individual and corporate character that will emulate that divine character in all situations of life. This is amply illustrated in Huebner’s drawing of inferences from this story for what justice means (chap. 6, “Justice and the Biblical Imagination”). The main protagonist of the biblical story is “giver-God.” Via the parable of the prodigal son, Huebner defines God’s justice as essentially grounded in forgiveness. Further, the cross as paradigmatic instance of suffering and weakness becomes the chief motif of divine presence and effective power. The resurrection is largely subsumed by the cross. It is the cross which holds the key to the meaning

of history. Thus, for example, the victory of the Lamb in the Apocalypse of John is the result of the Lamb's own death. The "wrath of the Lamb" is nothing other than the "true word" which people either accept or reject. Revelation 6 is seen as paradigmatic for this "wrath" in that no one gets killed. Those who do accept the true word are those who are then invited to reign. Thus the church itself is placed at the centre of God's telling of the story of history. The cross defines justice, and the church lives out its commitment and calling to justice insofar as it participates in the Lamb's redemptive suffering. That is the nature of its reign. Once again, with support from Stanley Hauerwas, John Howard Yoder, and James McClendon, Huebner reiterates that the church does not *have* a social ethic, it *is* a social ethic, thus stressing the incarnational and witness-oriented nature of biblical justice.

Schroeder's subsequent discussion of "binding and loosing" appears to redefine these terms rather thoroughly in light of the noncoercive telling of the biblical story (section IV, "The Good Life," chap. 7, "Binding and Loosing"). Binding and loosing do not reflect the juridical responsibilities of the church, as commonly held, but are to be understood rather as being loosed, on the one hand, from the powers of evil and being bound, on the other, to the will of God in covenant. The "rule of Christ" in Matthew 18 is understood not as punishment or as legal power to make decisions binding on God, but as invitation to reconciliation—as invitation to binding oneself to Christ and his ways. Such binding and loosing is exercised by a community that takes seriously the training of all of its members in the discipline of goodness, albeit never with a punitive or exclusionary disposition. Tellingly, in the view of Schroeder, errant members leave the church by their self-exclusion via the choices they have made. "Excommunication" is a ratification of that *self*-exclusion.

Such "loosing" from the world does not imply for Schroeder, however, that the church has no impact on the structures of society. While the church lives by a "totally different imagination" (167) it nonetheless continues to make an impact on the structures of society, precisely because those structures should be open to the wisdom and will of God.

In a final section entitled "Being in this World" Schroeder and Huebner conclude their book with discussions of two specific instances of ethical discernment, namely, abortion and the Gulf war. Schroeder intends to apply the notion of character and story to the thorny issue of abortion (chap. 9, "The Church and Abortion"). He argues that a strict pro-choice stance is inadequate since this is essentially a non-ethical stance, with the individual carrying the fetus the only one making a decision. But neither, interestingly, is a pro-life stance adequate, given the propensity toward legalism, that is, placing principle before person. Instead, Schroeder argues that the church community should address this matter with sensitivity to the particular person facing such a choice and, most importantly, in keeping with its character, the church must witness to what makes for life and goodness, inviting the person to choose in that direction. The church gives witness from within a framework of "bindings" regarding

sexuality, marriage, forgiveness, and readiness to offer the necessary support to the mother or family. Clearly rejected as a form of Constantinianism is the attempt to encourage legislation outlawing abortion. Ron Sider, for example, is criticized for precisely this. In the end, Schroeder appears unwilling to give an answer to the question of whether abortion is permissible apart from a consideration of persons, circumstances, and the sensitivities of the church. One is left to wonder whether there might not be a kind of "situationism" in this case, made inevitable by the fact that the church as the "content" of ethics is not of one mind (or at least those usually engaged in the formulation of the church's understandings are torn between conflicting values or virtues.)

This is quite different in Huebner's concluding sermon and reflections on the Gulf war (chap. 10, "The Church and the Gulf War"). Here the stance of the church is unequivocally to be opposed to war, irrespective of the circumstances. There can be no circumstances which would bring ambiguity to the church's refusal to participate in military action. This is so because it is the church's business to do nothing else but witness to its God, to be true to its character, in word and deed, and decidedly not to make history turn out right. What would have happened had the modes of reasoning employed by the two authors been applied to the other's test case? There are, after all, many who would see little ambiguity in the case of abortion but great ambiguity in cases of military intervention. More recently Somalia has presented Mennonites with much food for thought.

I found much in this book that is timely. The call for the church to be the church courageously, consistently, and without apology is a welcome and urgently needed summons. The call for Christians to have their imagination shaped by a story that began with creation, coming to a climax in Jesus, is welcome most especially at a time when the normativity of the Bible is eroding in Mennonite circles. Also a timely corrective is the insistence that for ethics to be truly Christian actions should express a character shaped by the habitual practice of divine virtues. I nonetheless found that my questions emerged at much the same points as did my often enthusiastic assent.

First, it is not clear to me exactly who the intended readers of this book are. The degree to which they are fellow ethicists and exegetes will make the book seem at times to have too much the character of an introductory college text. The characterizations of the modern age or of other positions have about them the feel of caricature. On the other hand, if readers are envisioned to be "laity," it is not clear to me that the jargon of "story," "character," "virtue," is any more evocative than is the older "gospel," "sanctification," or "fruits of the spirit." Further, whether for laity or experts, it is surprising that in a book of this length there could not be closer attention to issues that occupy the attention of pastors and church members more than abortion or the Gulf war—sexual abuse, divorce, homosexuality, participation in the structures of society (e.g., political office, police and correctional services), material wealth, etc. On these there is much confusion in congregations, both with respect to what stance to take on the

issues themselves, and how to respond to both victims and offenders. How would resort to story and identity resolve these issues?

This reality of the church's confusion and varied practice raises yet another issue. How is "church" being employed by the authors? Descriptively? Normatively? For the most part the church is depicted in this book as living by a "totally different imagination," quite distinct from the surrounding world in story and identity. In that sense it is at least somewhat intelligible to say that the church does not have an ethic but is one. (Even so that notion remains largely opaque.) On the other hand, the church the authors know and are addressing is lamentably not such a church. The authors appear to know that. It is the recognition that the church *as it is* could not possibly function as a norm that leads their writing of this book; hence its subtitle: "Whatever happened to ethics?" Little accounting is offered for how a church with a character shaped by divinely instilled virtues could have forgotten its story so thoroughly. What has subverted the virtues and corroded the character of a "storied people?" Nietzsche? Perhaps. But for most Mennonites that would be true only very indirectly. I suspect that there are easier explanations closer at hand. In what sense is the church a parable, to take up the title of the book? Parables are after all not always about good characters. Is the church a parable of faithfulness only, or perhaps as often a parable of story having been subverted? In other words, what would it mean to tell the story of the church (the Mennonite church) honestly, the way the Bible tells the story of Israel? Is such an account not required by the demands of a narrative approach to truth and ethics? Too often it seems that it is less real story than a relatively abstract notion of the good that governs the thinking of the authors. A full account of the story of the church would perforce need to deal much more than perfunctorily with the theme of sin (especially among the "storied people") and judgment, as now happens in this book in regard to the biblical story.

Further to that last point. Both authors appeal throughout to "the story of Israel and of Jesus" as the normative character-shaping centre. But how "thick" is their telling of this story? The story line seems to be governed greatly by the central event of a rather sanitized Jesus. This is buttressed in turn by a notion of consistency that requires that the father be defined by the son. The effect is that some of the main features of the biblical story fall largely from view. I fully agree with the authors that god's character is not divided ("God never acts out of character." 116), that even judgment must ultimately emerge out of the love of God. But for large portions of the biblical story such love is hidden in judgment to such a degree that it can only be asserted with a deep sense of faith and hope and an appreciation for mystery. It manifests itself as often as not throughout the biblical record as wrath and as destruction. It does not occur to biblical writers to relegate judgment consistently to the mechanism of cause and effect, or to think of God as defenceless in the face of human evil, as Schroeder suggests (113). Therein lies no relationship between God and humanity. Therein lies also finally no hope. God is more frequently depicted as an intervening, interrupting, and sometimes "violent" deity, in both Old and New Testaments, in Jesus, Paul and

John of Patmos. At times Huebner and Schroeder sound less interested in telling the whole of the "old old story" than in extrapolating what God does and what we should do in imitation of that God from a quite homogeneous character distilled from a very particular reading of Jesus. It is telling, for example, that the phrase "vengeance is mine" is drawn from Romans 12 and deliberately left unexplained rather than from its mother, Deuteronomy 32, where its frame is a hymn celebrating God as warrior (117). It is equally telling that the warrior on the horse in Revelation 19 is referred to in connection with the Lamb that was slain; nothing is said of the fact John of Patmos sees this Lamb on the horse as smiting the nations with sword and rod of iron (132-38). Whereas such selective story telling might be palatable to those trained in sophisticated hermeneutics, I suspect it will hardly wash with a laity rightly warned about the dangers of selective reading and proof texting.

This is an exceedingly vexing issue. But as long as we wish to make the biblical "story" foundational for our thinking about God and ourselves, rather than an ideology or even a "peace position," we will need to wrestle with a thick telling of the biblical story. There is today much tailoring of the biblical story, the hermeneutical scissors provided by ideological or political interests. In the end those interests, however important, are not well served. My concern here is not so much that I disagree with the vision the authors hold of the church's mission or of its ethical task. I concur with it for the most part wholeheartedly. My concern is rather with the grounding they offer for such an ethic. Here I remain restless after wrestling with this book. That, in the end, may not be a small compliment to this important work.

Review Article

Kaufman's Constructive Theology

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Gordon D. Kaufman, *In Face of Mystery. A Constructive Theology* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1993). Hardcover; 509 pp.

In Face of Mystery is Kaufman's *magnum opus*. It is the culmination (so far at least) of a dedicated Mennonite scholar's career driven by a passion for theological clarity and honesty. Given his background, it should perhaps not be surprising that this book, in its own way, deals with the quintessential themes of

Anabaptist/Mennonite theology, *viz.*, how to hold together the piety/mystery of religious belief on the one hand and incarnational/Christian practice on the other. It must be added, however, that although the spirit of Menno may still hover over his latest thoughts, it is doubtful that any of the old Menno-sages would recognise either the vocabulary or the theology expressed in this volume. And Kaufman would hold that this is as it should be. They lived in a very different world than he does.

As a student of Kaufman's (although never in his classroom), it has been interesting to observe how his critique of theological authoritarianism—usually grounded on a false biblicism—has driven his quest for an alternative theological method. (I have attempted to spell out this alternative in more detail in an essay in a forthcoming *Festschrift* in Kaufman's honour to be published by Herald Press. I do so by comparing the methodologies of Kaufman and the Christian philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre.) It is worth noting the progression of his thought. He began his critique of mainline theology by proposing an historicist alternative (*Systematic Theology: A Historicist Perspective*, 1968). He then moved to theology as imaginative construction (*An Essay on Theological Method*, 1975, rev. ed. 1979 and *The Theological Imagination: constructing the concept of God*, 1981). The current volume is a refinement of his previous insights proposing that we consider theology as attempts to view the ever elusive adventure of interpreting ourselves, our world and God from within the limits of our own creative quests at understanding the mysteries of life.

Kaufman begins his latest study, as he has most of his recent works, by asserting that the fundamental preoccupation of theology is the "question of God." The mistake has been for theologians to conceive the bible as the focus of theology. It is not. This means that God is the "principle which can undercut [biblical] authority completely" (19). It also means that the assumptions of a "one-dimensional theology" are false. Even a "two-dimensional theology" and natural theology, will not do. The task of theology must be more "holistic" than either approach acknowledges. It must be recognized for what it has always been, a human task of imaginative construction.

Hence theology can no longer be based upon "the exegesis of sacred texts of the arcane debates of learned intellectuals, not is it meditation or reflection in the privacy of one's solitude (however important may be the contributions of each of these), but rather free-flowing, open, and unfettered conversation" (66). As important, the old locus for such conversation—the church—is no longer an adequate arena for serious theology because of its inherent bias and lack of openness. The appropriate venue for such conversation in our time, suggests Kaufman ironically, is among the new learned intellectuals. He says, "It may be that the only institutional context available in modern society for such open and unfettered theological conversation is to be found in our great liberal universities" (67-68).

All past traditions—cultural, parochial, and philosophical—are now "outmoded" and can no longer provide us with adequate interpretations of ourselves,

God, and the world. They must be “superseded” by new models “constructed” through conversation within the academy where the imagination of “a global consciousness is beginning to take hold” (133).

The remaining pages of the book delve into the detailed process of constructing such a theology for our time. This entails re-imagining the concept of the human, of the world, and of God. He devotes one major section of the book to each topic.

The Human. We are biohistorical beings. That is, we are the shapers of everything about us including our ideas, values, standards, culture, etc. This being so, ours is the task and the challenge of optimal realization of ourselves and the entire world. We must take responsibility for the direction in which history is going. This requires a sensitive balancing act between order and freedom and indeed between biology and history. We must realize that without biologically sustainable practices we cannot long function in this world.

These considerations lead Kaufman directly to a view of ethics reminiscent of Immanuel Kant and H. Richard Niebuhr. The first commandment in this new ethic is simply the categorical imperative to act; the second is, “*So act that your action will sustain and strengthen the moral fabric!*” (203); and the third, act “with awareness of the wider meaning and significance of what you are doing” (206). All three are to be guided by an “imaginative vision of human life in the world [which] can most effectively provide orientation for our lives today” (224).

The World. Theologies of the past have constructed a model of the world employing dangerous and potentially destructive symbols and images. Fortunately, this model has become quite implausible to moderns. The traditional approach has been dominated by the presumption of divine agency patterned after an understanding of human agency. That is, we ascribe to God the very model agency we hold for ourselves. But this is extremely problematic, says Kaufman. An all-powerful cosmic agent can easily come to be seen as an authoritarian who acts arbitrarily and unjustly. This is, in fact, how the Apostle Paul describes God—as one who “has mercy upon whomever he wills, and... hardens the hearts of whomever he wills” (270). Moreover, this view of God demands a dualism which puts God outside of our universe (which to the modern mind is nonsense in any event) permitting us to consider our own actions as theologically irrelevant and at the same time legitimating the notion of God’s acts as anthropologically irrelevant.

In contradistinction Kaufman advances a view of the world which is more thinkable to the modern mind, one “based on the creative development in history of human culture as a whole” (273). He refers to this model as “the serendipity of history” (273). He means by this the tendency within historical events and processes to produce more than was intended. That is, “the tendency to outrun human expectations and purposes” (273). E.g., the signing of the Magna Carta in 1215 had quite limited intentions but it has come to be seen as the foundational event of modern democratic societies. That is, its impact went far beyond mere

human anticipation. He admits that this can also lead to unhappy consequences, as for example, the signing of the Versailles Treaty, which was intended to bring peace but, not too many years later, brought the Second World War. Nevertheless, the task of constructing a theology of the world is to discern the "directional movements in a serendipitous universe."

God. Kaufman's comments about the theological construction of the world lead him directly to the theological construction of the concept of God as trinitarian. The first person of the trinity is, in his model, to be understood as "the creativity which seemingly expresses itself in and through everything that exists" (296). This is but a new way of speaking of what was traditionally referred to as the ground and foundation of all that is. But just as the early Christians found it too vague to speak of God as "creator" of "foundation" and added to this construct notions like "logos" and "order" thereby allowing themselves to see Jesus Christ (the second person) as the one through whom all things were created, so must we. Kaufman's concept of "directional movements" towards the authentically human is the new form of expression for the second person of the trinity. For Kaufman, Christ signifies "the new order of relationships among humans and between humans and God which began to come into being in connection with Jesus and developed further after his death and resurrection" (383). The "wider Christology" which he advocates focuses specifically on the theological concept of "Christ" abstracted from ancient Palestinian culture as a "paradigm for God and for humanity" (396). The concrete expression of this paradigm must be seen in the larger cosmic evolutionary movements of history towards humanization. The new construct of the third person of the trinity is the creativity of the human subjective spirit as it participates in this process.

Response. It is not easy to give a brief response to Kaufman. He has taught me much over the years about how to do theology and indeed about how not to do theology. For that I am most grateful. I agree with him that Christian theology cannot simply be the repetition and explication of the words of the Bible. However, I disagree that we must therefore "supersede" the Bible and the theological traditions of the church in ways he suggests. I agree that issues such as omnipotence and divine agency have become largely unintelligible to the modern mind, but I disagree that the radical reconceptualization of these notions in terms of a depersonalized "God as serendipitous creativity" helps us to come to know the God of Abraham and Sarah, Jesus and Paul, that is, the Christian God. That is to say, while I can agree with many of the theological problems Kaufman identifies, I find his Kantian-type solutions presupposing the universality of rationality and morality, and the enlightenment of the modern mind to be quite unconvincing. Concretely this implies that I can find no way of doing theology without taking the notions of church, tradition and the Bible as givens in ways the Kaufman does not.

Moreover, at a crucial point Kaufman is ambiguous about his proposed methodology. On the one hand theology is to be "conversation," making it

possible to include everyone as *bona fide* partners. Since the church has failed in this the “liberal universities” present themselves to Kaufman as the new church. This strikes me as quite odd. First, the universities as I know them have always been more elitist than most churches I know. Granted there is here an inclusivity of cultures, ideologies, lifestyles, religions, etc. not found in churches, but there is also an exclusivity based on education, intelligence and perhaps even social class. For that matter, how can the university be inclusive when it is by definition an institute for the learned. Second, there is much in Kaufman’s own approach that exemplifies exclusivism and elitism. Virtually all of traditional theology, including the Bible, gets sidelined. There is virtually no serious dialogue with any traditional theologian in the whole book. I do not find the book to be either “conversational” or “inclusive.” It is “argumentative” of a particular thesis (not surprising from a university professor), dismissing conflicting positions via superficial caricature.

In the end I wonder whether this apparent “inconsistency” is really due to a failure of methodological rigour. Might it be that Kaufman himself does not believe that theology is mere “unfettered conversation” after all? I suspect there is operative within his own approach a hidden authority perhaps all the more powerful because it remains hidden. If exposed it would probably look much like the Enlightenment’s principles of universal rationality. And this is why theology as represented in this book is, in the final analysis, more lecture than conversation, his own claims notwithstanding.

I was disappointed that Kaufman was not more honest with his readers at precisely this point. I too want to believe that lecture is not the most appropriate medium of Christian theology. But I disagree that “unfettered conversation” can be the happy alternative. Conversation has its own hidden authorities. Can there not be a more honest and open approach which acknowledges its inability to escape the Christian tradition and which therefore invites readers and hearers into a process of a critical exploration of precisely that narrative? In other words, are we not compelled by both the Christian and the post-modern spirits, to go beyond Kaufman, and shed the shackles of the liberal commitments to a universal reason and ethic, thereby freeing ourselves to affirm the particularities of Christian knowledge and goodness? Until the concealed authorities of Kaufman’s “theology as conversation” or “imaginative construction in face of mystery” get fully exposed I confess that I remain sceptical of his project.