

## Ethical Exploration in a Multifaith Society

CATHERINE SHELLEY

Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2017, ix + 338 pp (hardback £72.00) ISBN: 978-3-319-46710-8

Andre Malraux in 1955 wrote more prophetically than perhaps he knew when he said that ‘the task of the next century . . . will be the reintroduction of gods into it’. No one could doubt that today’s is a multi-faith society in which religion motivates millions, drawing, at the same time, both support and condemnation from millions of others.

Is any vision of what Rawls called ‘overlapping consensus’ possible at all? Can we discern what Lon Fuller termed an ‘inner morality’ in all our diversity? Do other faith communities ‘think like us’? Is any global ethical framework possible? Is religion, in truth, part of the problem or part of the solution? What place have religious belief and varied ethical tradition to play in public as well as private life? In short, do theological ethics have the capacity to help us to live well on our shared human journey, with all its hopes and fears, tensions and paradoxes, its divisions of opinion, belief and interpretation?

These are some of the daunting challenges that the Revd Dr Catherine Shelley has courageously set herself in this ambitious, cross-disciplinary ‘ethical exploration’, in which she writes variously as philosopher, theologian, priest and practising lawyer, recognising, entirely realistically, that ‘law, theology, ethics and practice are closely intertwined’ (p 150). She has taken immense care to be fair in her judgements and conclusions. She has plainly immersed herself in the overlapping hermeneutical, pedagogical and casuistic methods and concepts of some of the great faiths. She has paid careful attention to the very real risk of ‘portraying a homogeneity that is illusory’ (p 8), while at the same time aiming to enhance ethical understanding across divergent worldviews. She is convinced that there is ‘much wisdom still to be distilled’ from the scriptures and traditions of the major faiths, acknowledging that ‘theological ethics requires an exercise in translation to glean and read religious scriptures in ways that are relevant to our times yet authentic to the spirituality and wisdom of their original vision’ (p 10).

Dr Shelley readily recognises the ‘saturation and utilitarianism of market consumerism’ (p 302), which so often works to drown out the religious voice in the public square. Her passion is an ultimately practical one, namely that ‘theological and religious perspectives on ethics can bring alternative insights to bear on ethical dilemmas facing the whole of humanity and indeed creation’ (p 270).

In ten substantial chapters she sets the scene for the interweaving of religious and secular thought. She traces ways in which reason has been employed in both philosophical and theological ethics over time, in different traditions. She looks at natural law, virtue ethics and human rights. She assesses utilitarianism and

its limitations, recognising, rightly, that 'human finitude, self-serving delusion and fragility mean that we cannot always assess the best thing for ourselves or for others' (p 125). She turns then to different approaches to authority, exploring personal autonomy, the nature of conscience, the role of law as applied to both secular and religious paradigms, and the relationship between secular and religious laws, systems and courts.

The significance of religious texts, their authority and interpretation, is immensely important in building norms and shaping ethical and community narratives. Unsurprisingly, Dr Shelley is driven to the conclusion that interpretations result in relationships to wider culture which 'are either assimilative or counter-cultural and a range of perspectives in between' (p 196). Don't we know ... Having explored various stances that faith communities adopt, 'consciously or incidentally, as they live out their faith in response to theological imperatives and authorities' (p 229), she turns, in a particularly demanding and ultimately somewhat inconclusive Chapter 8, to methodological issues by which faith-based conclusions are typically reached. She later skilfully underlines the significant impact of globalisation, highlighting a number of practical challenges which amply justify her judgment that 'religious ethics are not limited to personal morality' (p 14).

In her final chapter Dr Shelley reflects upon 'how far diversity can be accommodated by agreements to disagree and those areas in which bridging of the gaps is needed'. Options are explored for doing so 'through conversation, theological language, common epistemology and frameworks like human rights' (p 15). The chapter, 'like the book, aims to provide a platform for further conversation and ethical exploration by others with an interest and stake in developing and applying common ethical norms' (p 15). But who will those others be?

I so wanted to like this book. Its subject is one of burning contemporary relevance. Dr Shelley herself is beyond doubt an immensely talented and well-informed scholar and theologian. She is a fellow ecclesiastical lawyer and an Ecclesiastical Law Society stalwart. Her breadth of reading and depth of understanding can only be envied. But, as a general reader, I confess I found the book hard-going. At times I felt lost in a blizzard of names, concepts, thoughts and references. Dr Shelley assumes much in the way of vocabulary and understanding, far beyond the non-specialist reader. At other times, sketchy summaries and potted history look destined to frustrate the true specialist reading this book.

I longed for Dr Shelley the Christian minister to give me more help with where the well-articulated pragmatism of her ethical exploration and God's special revelation collide, if they do; or where boundaries for making common cause with those of other faiths and none begin and end, if they do. Perhaps that is another book. I hope she may write it.

I have a suspicion, when reflecting upon natural law generally, that it may be overly optimistic to suggest that unaided reason or even human religion, after the Fall, leads people to actionable truths. I am convinced, as I am sure Dr Shelley is, that in Christ are hidden ‘all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge’ (Colossians 2:3), including wisdom for the public square. That seems a good reason to celebrate (with all grace and humility) the continuing power and attraction of Christian ethics.

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## Great Christian Jurists in English History

Edited by MARK HILL QC AND R H HELMHOLZ

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The title of this book smacks of the nineteenth century rather than the twenty-first. Whereas the Victorians loved collections of biographical sketches which celebrated their illustrious ancestors and contemporaries, modern readers (and writers) tend to be shy of the term ‘great’ – far too elitist – especially when placed alongside ‘Christian’. For those of us who are not ecclesiastical legal historians, however, the traditional approach adopted in these excellent essays on great lives and great works is welcome, as is the notable absence of legal jargon in the book.

Mark Hill QC, who is an associate or visiting professor at universities in Cardiff, Pretoria, London and Sydney, and R H Helmholz, Professor of Law at the University of Chicago, explain in the preface that this study on selected ‘legal titans in English legal history’ (p xxi) is part of Cambridge’s ambitious series of Studies in Law and Christianity. As editors they felt that the ‘span of history needed to be fully reflected, as did England’s evolution from a monolithic Christian society where religious beliefs were universally held to the rich pluralism of today’s secular world’ (p xxi). So we are presented with essays that range from Henry of Bratton (*alias* Bracton), born around 1200, to Lord Denning, who died in 1999 at the age of 100. These men may have inhabited different worlds, but both were masters of the common law of England and both were Christians.

Nicholas Vincent explains that the treatise called *Bracton*, which may have been among the property that Henry of Bratton bequeathed at his death,