

**Michael Banner**

*Christian Ethics: A Brief History.*

Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell 2009.

150 pages

CA\$100.95/US\$83.95 (cloth ISBN 978-1405115179)

CA\$28.95/US\$23.95 (paper ISBN 978-1405115186)

In *Christian Ethics: A Brief History*, Michael Banner tells the story of the development of Christian ethics. In the process, Banner shows how Christians themselves have disagreed through the ages, how non-Christian philosophers—Hobbes, for example—influenced its development, and what contribution Christian moral thought still makes today.

One might expect such a history to begin with the Bible, but Banner starts with a small work from the early Church: the *Rule of St. Benedict* (550 C.E.), which he claims is the paradigmatic framework with which to understand Christian ethics. The *Rule of St. Benedict* is a monastic handbook for living, which teaches the ‘what’, ‘how’, and ‘why’ of Christian living: *what* it means to live well, *how* to live well, and *why*. The *what* is ‘to live in community with God and neighbor, finding our good in offering them our loving service: to the one worship, and to the other, aid and fellowship in the very stuff of life’ (17). The *how* is of special concern because the author of the *Rule of St. Benedict* (Benedict, it is thought) sees the problem of the moral life not as one of lacking moral knowledge, but of doing what one knows to be right. The *how* for Benedict is: with humility. The *why* is a question of authority, and Benedict’s authority is the Bible. So, the Bible makes an appearance in Banner’s book, but it is indirect, i.e. through the historical lenses of Christian philosophers and theologians. Banner explains that to devote a whole chapter to the Bible would be to promote ‘biblicism’, the misconception that the Bible is simply a book of rules. Certainly, he is right that the Bible is much more complex than many Christians today represent it to be, and his way of exploring Christian thought by reading about how prominent figures in the tradition have interpreted the ‘biblical story’ is a helpful approach. However, readers should be aware that there is a long debate within Christian circles about the nature of revelation and the problem of applying the Bible to contemporary issues. If readers are interested in exploring this more deeply, one place to start would be with Gary Meadors’ *Four Views on Moving Beyond the Bible to Theology* (2009).

If the *Rule of St. Benedict* supplies the picture of Christian ethics in practice, Augustine supplies the theory behind the practice. In Chapter 2, Banner describes Augustine’s contribution to Christian thought and how it set the stage for Christian ethics. Augustine’s writings against the Manichees and the Pelagians illustrate his theory. Against the Manichees, Augustine argues that, contrary to their radical dualism, the whole world was created by God, and it needs saving. The physical world is not, as the Manichees allege, evil in itself. The world may be fallen, but the physical world was

created by God, says Augustine. This leads to a theology of sex that sees sex—sex within marriage—as good and intended by God. Against the Pelagians, who teach that human nature is good, Augustine argues that we cannot save ourselves. Banner explains: ‘Manichees are wrong to think the flesh evil, whereas Pelagians are wrong to think it is not disordered or that its ills are of such a kind that we can ourselves, by our willpower, accomplish our deliverance. We cannot. And specifically we cannot do the good without assistance of divine grace to release us from that discord in which we cannot will wholly and well’ (35).

Banner makes many important stops on his historical tour of Christian ethics. He shows how Aquinas, in contrast to Augustine, emphasizes a strong continuity in human nature as unfallen, fallen, and redeemed. Augustine is much more pessimistic about human nature, and Banner shows how this ‘disagreement’ between the two reemerges later in the difference between the approaches of Karl Barth and John Paul II. As a side, Banner seems skeptical of Aquinas’ natural law project (at least as promoted by Thomism). Banner says, ‘The claims of natural law are, where uncontroversial, uninteresting and where interesting, controversial’ (51). His next stop on the journey is the Reformation. He considers (and apparently agrees with) Bonhoeffer’s charge that Luther undermines Christian ethics with his emphasis on grace alone. He also argues that Luther’s teaching about reason and politics makes the project of ethics much more difficult. Other figures he examines include Butler, Kant, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche.

In the final chapter, ‘History in the Present: Genetics, Philosophy, and Christian Life’, Banner shows how historical Christian ethics applies to contemporary issues. He explains that modern consequentialism is unsatisfactory and points out that many philosophers, like Michael Sandel, use terms (like ‘the sanctity of life’) that have Christian origins. Banner argues (against Sandel’s critics) that one need not accept Christian metaphysics in order to use such terms. He thinks that such concepts are historically embedded in our cultural framework and our ability to recognize moral obligations is simply a fact about us as participants in such a framework. What Christianity can and should provide today is ‘therapy’. He says, ‘Religion speaks to the heart. It can offer a therapy of our desires. We began with Benedict, and, even in an age of genetic engineering, we can end with Benedict. In his day, and in ours, the practice of the Christian life centers around the stories contained in the Scriptures. These stories, with or without metaphysics, have the power to inspire humility, worship, and service ... And to the extent that we live by these stories we may discover a way of being in the world and with one another which is distinctive and critical’ (136).

Although Banner states that he does not intend to defend Christianity, his positive opinion of it emerges (which is not of itself a short-coming). He seems skeptical of the use of reason alone to establish moral knowledge, hence his subtle criticism of Thomism and John Paul II. Nevertheless, he sees Christianity as making a positive contribution to the development of our modern moral thinking. He thinks that

Christianity supplies an alternative perspective—a different story—that helps us better deal with our current problems like biotechnology. He is right that we do not have to ask the metaphysical questions to use the Christian notions embedded in our culture, but it seems natural to do so. And if we do, where will that lead us?

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