



BOOK REVIEW

Luke Bretherton, *A Primer in Christian Ethics: Christ and the Struggle to Live Well*

(Cambridge: CUP, 2023), pp. x + 377. \$105.00

Jennifer A. Herdt

Yale Divinity School, New Haven, CT, USA (jennifer.herd@yale.edu)

Writing an introduction to a field is no easy task, particularly when the field is as wide-ranging and interdisciplinary as Christian ethics. Add to this the fact that we find ourselves in a moment acutely aware of the ways in which our fields and disciplines have been decisively shaped by unequal distributions of power along lines of race, class, gender, sexuality and ability, unjustly centring white, male, European voices. How, in such a context, does one engage in the necessary critical stock-taking while offering a vision of the field as something worth inhabiting and furthering? Luke Bretherton's *A Primer in Christian Ethics* rises to the occasion.

Other influential recent introductions to Christian ethics offer typologies of approaches. Robin Lovin identifies four variations on the Christian stance: synergy, integrity, realism and liberation.¹ Samuel Wells and Ben Quash identify three strands: universal, subversive and ecclesial.² These approaches harken back to H. Richard Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture* (1951). Typologies encourage differentiation, analysis and critique, which can be helpful in moments of complacency. Bretherton takes a different tack, one that is more synthetic, engaged and invitational.

To call Bretherton's approach synthetic is not to say that it homogenises or papers over differences. On the contrary, Part I is devoted to expanding the Wesleyan quadrilateral of scripture, reason, experience and tradition to include a broader array of sources of authority for Christian ethics. Proper description of the world within which we act, argues Bretherton, as the first task of Christian ethics, requires attending to creation, scripture, strangers, those crying out for liberation and ancestors. Our proper stance in relation to these sources is one of listening. There is nothing neat or tidy about this process. So, for instance, although scripture is affirmed as the 'norming norm' for Christian ethics, Bretherton also insists that scripture 'participates in histories of confusion, conflict and domination' and points beyond itself to the Word of God (p. 55). Bretherton underscores his pluralisation of sources for Christian ethics by placing listening to creation in the first place. This is not merely a dramatic departure from the characteristic anthropocentrism of most Christian ethical reflection but more properly a return to a theocentric understanding of human life as enmeshed in and dependent on myriad relations and systems. Aspirations to maximally autonomous

¹Robin Lovin, *An Introduction to Christian Ethics: Goals, Duties, and Virtues* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2011).

²Samuel Wells and Ben Quash, *Introducing Christian Ethics*, 2nd edn (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2017).

agency thus give way to what Bretherton characterises as ‘metabolic’ agency. And indeed, Bretherton’s whole approach is aptly considered metabolic in character. Christian ethics does not, for instance, guard its identity and distinctiveness by attending solely to Christian sources. Rather, listening to non-Christian ‘strangers’ in ways attentive to difference opens up possibilities for a fruitful common life. Listening to cries for liberation, meanwhile, starts with acknowledging the pervasive ways in which epistemic injustice obscures the voices of the destitute and oppressed while feeding ignorance and indifference on the part of the privileged. ‘Listening to ancestors’, finally, involves recognising both the dependency of human life on shared traditions of thought and practices and the contested character of these traditions. Classic sources of Christian ethics remain a vital part of the conversation, but listening to the ancestors is a far cry from a nostalgic traditionalism that seeks refuge in an idealised past.

In Part II, the focus shifts from listening and describing the reality within which we act to the task of discerning how to act well within this reality, attending to resources that support (or, conversely, inhibit) judging and acting well: commands, rules, virtues and practical wisdom, on the one hand, and sin and evil, on the other. This affords Bretherton ample opportunity to take up a host of topics long central to the discipline, including adjacent questions such as the relation of Christian ethics to the deontological and utilitarian approaches central to modern moral philosophy, while continuing to metabolise the broad array of voices and sources identified in Part I. Divine call and vocation, covenant, eternal law, orders of creation, law and gospel, cardinal and theological virtues, eudaimonism, judgement and deliberation all have a place here, in a vision in which God’s commands invite human creatures into flourishing forms of common life given form in covenant and sustained by virtues, rules and ongoing exercises of practical reasoning amidst conditions of finitude and fallenness.

The three substantial chapters that constitute Part III, finally, are devoted to three particular social arenas within which the Christian life is lived out: intimate, economic and political relations. Here Bretherton puts into practice the forms of listening identified in Part I, together with an orientation to judgement and action informed by the categories discussed in Part II. Intimacy (a refreshingly ample frame for reflection on much more than sex and family) has to do with living with creaturely vulnerability in ways that foster care and connection rather than precarity. Economic life is properly oriented to forms of distribution and exchange that acknowledge that all that is manufactured and consumed is first received as gift, and that human economies participate in God’s economy. Politics, meanwhile, cultivates common life with others in ways oriented to new creation, attentive to the tragic tension between the goods of justice and order in a fallen world, and mindful of the ‘pastoral’ joys and concerns of ordinary life.

In the Epilogue, Bretherton acknowledges that the book raises more questions than it answers. This is no handbook to settle controversial ethical issues. It is, though, just what we need now: a generative, capacious and inspiring vision for the ongoing work of Christian ethics in a fallen but still precious world.

doi:10.1017/S0036930624000528