

A Brief History of Christian Ethics

My Christian Ethics course at Regent's consisted of four tutorials, during which I was assured that I would learn enough to realise I knew next to nothing. Entitled "A Brief History of Christian Ethics", we might be forgiven for expecting Michael Banner's little volume would offer us little more. But for a book so short it is disproportionately powerful, and far from being an 'idiot's guide' it has its own distinctive voice and its own case to offer.

This is not a text book. Historical Christian thinkers, whose inaccessible works leave us feeling guilty for not having read them properly, are not presented to us as though we lived in a vacuum. The manner in which the author guides us through the works of Benedict, for instance, betrays his own deep awareness of twenty first century moral issues. The same might be said of his treatment of Augustine, Aquinas and Luther. His engagement with each figure serves an obvious single purpose, bringing each chapter to life with a clarity and continuity that flow through the entire text.

The purpose seems not so much to provide the reader with historical knowledge, but to aid contemporary self-awareness. This is no mere storeroom of resources that Christians can pick up and use as they engage with complex moral problems. The overall goal is more radical. We are encouraged to understand ourselves and our ethical position in the modern world in light of the creedal affirmations of Christian belief. The beliefs that shape our identity are many, complex and varied, and Banner's walk through Christian history helps us to get to grips with the often hidden roots of those beliefs.

When Christians engage in complex moral debates, it is all too easy for them to quote Scripture in support of their unwittingly pagan beliefs. This little book is a substantive engagement with the contemporary ethics, precisely because it is historical in its scope. It enables the contemporary thinker to hear the wisdom of history and provides a glimpse into the depths of that wisdom.

One wonders at times, especially in his treatment of Benedict and Aquinas, quite how the author manages to extract some of the insights he does from the material under consideration. Occasionally the question may surface, as to whether Banner has over-interpreted his sources for the sake of the case he makes. In such instances, however, the only solution is to turn to the primary sources themselves which – after all – can only be in line with the purpose of the book.

The chapters on each figure are relatively short, and the reader feels a lightness of touch. But for all Banner's 'easy-to-read' style, we are given confidence of enormous depth in his treatment of great Christian thinkers. This book penetrates to the heart of Christian discipleship and theology, and fuses ancient wisdom with contemporary ethical deliberation.

A Brief History of Christian Ethics is the readable work of a heavyweight scholar.