

Theology: A Very Short Introduction. Oxford University Press. Ford, David

Week 2 Chapters 4 & 5 “*The serpent was more cunning than any other animal*”
Ethics and Theology; Living with Real Good and Real Evil.

Chapter 4 Living before God: Worship and Ethics

Selected Reading

“Theology and Worship” Bottom of pages 51 – middle page 56
“Being human before God” Pages 66 & 67

Summary

Ford defines worship as the behaviour of individuals and groups which serves their ultimate concern. To have only one imperative concern is like monotheism, to have a wide range of such concerns is like polytheism. But if god is what you worship, then our gods take many forms – money, family, nation, pleasure – as well as more traditionally religious ideas. But a theology which tried to encompass everything that could be worshipped would be impossibly vast, so instead Ford turns our attention back to the Trinitarian God.

How we worship suggests our theological understandings: When we praise God for his attributes – his goodness, justice, might, wisdom, mercy, etc., then we must believe that God possesses them. This prompts the question of whether God is good in the same way as a good person is good, for example. Thanking God for what he has done, implies a belief that God can and does act. Intercession does too, but in addition intercession, implies that God enters into a relationship with those who appeal to him. In turn confession builds on that concept of relationship, but introduces the idea of sin, and the question of Jesus’ action in dealing with it. The role of theology in worship is to draw worshippers into a fuller recognition of the one whom they worship.

There are many different foundations for ethical thought, many of them deny any role for God, but theological ethics is ethical thought that takes God seriously. Ethics is not just about making difficult decisions, it’s about the formation of the character of human beings. For Christians, it is about forming and sustaining of good desires, and recognizing that our desire for God is a response to his desire for us. But you can only talk about ethics in the context of God, if you know what God is like, and that is where theology comes in.

A very major question in relation to Christian ethics relates to human and divine freedom. Can a human be said to act morally, if it has not been a free choice to act that way? If God is free to act and take the initiative, does that not mean that God’s freedom is in conflict with human freedom? One answer is to suggest that as in a loving relationship, one partner can take action to enhance and increase the freedom of the other. But is it right to use this analogy to understand how God respects human freedom – or is God so totally other so that such comparisons are misleading?

Perhaps our truest freedom, lies in giving ourselves in response to God’s initiative. God and humanity need not be in competition. Human beings are not divine, but they are invited into a relationship with God. And in Jesus Christ, God has shared in Humanity. We see in Jesus’ life a picture of Humanity’s potential relationship with God, desiring and being desired by God, desiring what God desires, freely choosing to live a life of obedience.

A fundamental resource for Christian ethical enquiry is the Bible. But it has to be interpreted – what is the authority of the Old Testament Laws? What of New Testament views on, for example, women and slavery? Are those views binding? Can they be ignored as culturally conditioned?

It is possible to identify three key factors determining the shape of theological ethics

1. How we understand the nature of God

2. Our response to the persons of the Trinity.

Which person is uppermost in our understanding, will colour our ethical standpoint. If it is...

- God as Creator, then we will emphasise the essential unity of all people, and our ethics will tend to be collaborative
- Jesus as Word of God, then we will highlight his distinctive teaching, and generally challenge any ethic not based on self-sacrificial love
- Spirit centred, then we will focus on the importance of transforming individuals and communities

At best Christian ethics will try to combine all three.

3. How we view what it is to be human

Christians have seen the truest representative of humanity in the person and life of Jesus. But this too is not without its problems - can a male represent a female, for example?

The more you asks fundamental ethical questions, the more you realise that there are always more questions to answer. The task of theology in this is to bring the wisdom, and the acknowledged foolishness, of the long tradition of living in relationship with God into the debate.

Questions for discussion

1. How do you decide what is morally right or wrong for you?
Does the fact that you are a Christian make any difference?

2. Look at the pictures on pages 57 and 65.

La Sainte Face

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

What do these pictures, and the stories that lie behind them, say to you about the relationship between our understanding of God, and the direction of our lives?

3. Some Christians ask themselves “What would Jesus do?¹” as the basis of their ethical decision making. Do you think that that is a sensible approach? What do you think are its advantages and disadvantages, if any?

1. “In His Steps” subtitled “What Would Jesus Do?”
Charles Sheldon, 1896. Published by the Chicago Advance.

Chapter 5 Facing Evil

Selected Reading

“Personal, Structural and Natural Evil”

Pages 69-72

“Evil as Idolatry”

Pages 77-80

Summary

The existence of evil is a problem for those who believe in a good God, but even those who do not believe must also face the problem of determining the correct response to it. The name used for the theology of God and evil is “Theodicy.” Evil raises questions of freedom and responsibility. If you wish to argue that you are not responsible for some evil that you have committed, then you are acknowledging that you do not have complete freedom.

Augustine wanted to absolve God of responsibility for evil, so he attributed it to Adam’s abuse of his freedom – but Augustine also wanted to keep God in control of everything, and it’s not easy to reconcile the two ideas. In addition to identifying responsibility for personal sin, there is the complicated issue of who is responsible for “structural sin,” for example unjust political systems, stock market crashes, unexpected consequences of new technologies. Christian thinkers have sometimes seen these forces as demonic, and spoken of “powers and principalities.”

As well as humanly created evil, there is the evil of natural suffering, which does not seem to be humankind’s fault, and presumably then is God’s. One solution to the philosophical problem of a good God in a world of suffering is to suggest that the cost of true freedom is suffering. If God intervened to stop it, human beings would be mere puppets or robots. In addition, good sometimes comes out of suffering.

Who is the best person to make a judgement about suffering – the sufferer or an observer? You would think that the sufferer would find the suffering more intolerable, and be more likely to doubt God, but that is often not the case. That many can both suffer, and yet maintain their faith in a good God, suggests that there is an answer to the problem of evil, even if theologians have been unable to express it satisfactorily. What is not often recognized is that if there is a mystery of evil, there is no less a mystery of good. Trinitarian theology sees Jesus as one on whom the dramas of good and evil are played out.

If the divine is whatever you worship, then human evil is idolatry, worshipping that which is not God. Worshiping the Trinitarian God presents a vision of what is ultimate, centred on Jesus Christ. It challenges idolatrous worship, which is focussed on economic success, status, security, pleasure and power. Combatting such idolatry is one area where the different religious traditions can work together, especially amongst Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs, who are disproportionately represented at the margins of society.

Some world views, Christian and non-Christian, philosophical and scientific, have proposed meta-narratives, i.e. over-arching and all-encompassing stories, to account for the world as it has been, is and will be. Many Christian theologians are cautious about such meta-narratives, nevertheless the story of Jesus is an essential one for Christian self-understanding, in the context of the question of evil. However, the Christian theologian’s emphasis is not so much on the problem of evil, but on helping to build up communities within which evil is resisted.

Questions

4. At the time of your worst suffering, did you feel that God was closer to you, or further from you, than at other times? Where do you now think that God was in your suffering?
5. Look at the picture of the statue of a woman holding her dead child (p. 74). What should our reaction be to such suffering? What do you think is God’s reaction?
6. Why do you think God allows a) natural and b) human-made suffering to continue? Is there a connection between the two?