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ETHICS

BONHOEFFER AND THE BIOSCIENCES: An Initial Exploration by Ralf K. Wüstenberg, Stefan Heuser, and Esther Hornung, eds. Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2010. 183 pages. Hardcover; \$57.95. ISBN: 9783631598450.

At first glance, the title *Bonhoeffer and the Biosciences* seems puzzling. What could a man who died over sixty years ago contribute to twenty-first-century discussions of biosciences and bioethics? There are two explanations. First, the book—the third in Peter Lang’s *International Bonhoeffer Interpretations* series—is not really about Dietrich Bonhoeffer per se. Most of the essays do not present a thorough reading of his writings (two do not engage Bonhoeffer at all) and few interact critically with contemporary Bonhoeffer scholarship. Instead, the authors explore what they call “the hermeneutics of human life,” built upon some key themes drawn mostly from Bonhoeffer’s *Ethics*, in order to frame theological and ethically the discussion of various issues in the biosciences. As Hans Ulrich nicely puts it in the final chapter, “Bonhoeffer’s texts will be primarily fruitful for our ethical work when we do not look for passages in Bonhoeffer’s ethics which seem to be immediately relevant for solving moral dilemmas, but when we follow his descriptions of our human existence” (p. 170).

Second, the book does not aim primarily to propose specific solutions to current ethical problems in the biosciences. Its aim is less to teach us *what* to think about current issues than *how* to begin to address them in a way that takes seriously, and in an integrated way, the reality of God, the complexity of human existence, and the integrity of the biological sciences. This reflects Bonhoeffer’s emphasis on the Incarnation as *the* event that unites the reality of God with the reality of the world in the person of Jesus Christ. Moreover, as the book’s uniting theme, “the hermeneutics of human life,” suggests, it reflects the

authors’ desire to offer not merely abstract principles or simplistic rules, but to prompt deeper ethical reflection based upon a “thick” theological account of human existence in the light of the Incarnation. Before we get to principles and rules, we need an interpretive framework in which they can be contextually and fruitfully employed.

The book comprises a foreword, ten chapters, an index, an appendix, and a descriptive list of the contributors. In the first chapter, Stefan Heuser introduces the book’s overarching theme and foreshadows the topics to be discussed in the following chapters. In chapter 2, Christoph Rehmann-Sutter picks up on Bonhoeffer’s discussion of the inter-relatedness of all human life and discusses the significance of interpretive decisions about the “beginning” of human life for issues such as stem cell research and IVF.

Next, David Clough (chap. 3) argues against claims that humans are distinct from animals to support ethical arguments. He criticizes Bonhoeffer’s tendency to do this in *Creation and Fall* but applauds Bonhoeffer’s relational interpretation of the image of God and his reflections on Christ becoming a creature. Clough feels this better affirms all of life, not just human life. However, in my estimation, he makes some questionable claims of Bonhoeffer’s views, partly because Clough does not seem to consider Bonhoeffer’s historical context in WWII Germany, and thus misses Bonhoeffer’s polemical intent.

In chapter 4, Robert Song calls us to reject an idolatrous approach to technology that either views technology as the savior of the human condition or as helping us to become like God *apart from God*. Rather, we should find our likeness to God *in relationship with God* (Bonhoeffer’s *sicut Deus* vs. *imago Dei*). Bonhoeffer helps us to avoid what Song calls “posthumanism” and leads us to develop an approach to technology that is more faithful and contextually concrete.

Bernd Wannewetsch (chap. 5) applies Bonhoeffer’s concepts of “responsibility” (in *Ethics*) and “loving the limit” (in *Creation and Fall*) in reflecting upon the delicate tension between patient autonomy and physician responsibility. In place of both “professionalism” and contractualism (focusing on rights, duties, liabilities, etc.), he emphasizes vocation and what he calls “total responsibility.”

In chapter 6, Michael P. DeJonge employs Bonhoeffer’s argument that “natural life is formed life” to clarify and integrate the relationship between rights and duties in patient-doctor relationships. In this perspective, formed life is both an end *and* a means, correspondingly involving both rights that protect basic dignity *and* duties that serve human purpose. Problems arise when these are separated. Regarding life exclusively as an end absolutizes life, leading to “vitalization” and a one-sided focus on individual rights and autonomy. Regarding life exclusively as a means leads to “mechanization” and a one-sided focus on the duties of individuals to uphold the “common good,” whatever that may be. While Bonhoeffer faced the latter danger in his context, DeJonge argues that America presently struggles with the former.

Sigrid Graumann (chap. 7) reflects on the problem that “many disabled people feel discriminated by Prenatal Diagnosis” (p. 124). In dialogue with Charles Taylor, Axel

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Honneth, and Nancy Fraser (but not Bonhoeffer), he seeks a more adequate analysis of the social problems linked with prenatal diagnosis.

In chapter 8, Heinrich Bedford-Strohm discusses the role of public theology in relation to biotechnology by reflecting on Bonhoeffer's assertion that the church is called to hold the state accountable when its policies are morally questionable. In order to fulfill this call, Bedford-Strohm argues that the church needs a threefold public discourse strategy: (1) an internal debate about the implications of biotechnologies; (2) an ongoing dialogue with key public figures such as scientists, politicians, and business leaders; and (3) input into public debate indicating both interest and wise reflection concerning fundamental societal questions.

Hans Ulrich (chap. 9) argues that understanding the human condition is the common task of science, hermeneutics, and ethics. No one discipline can claim exclusive ownership of bioethical questions. An interdisciplinary approach is necessary to account for the complexity of the human condition. In the concluding chapter, Ulrich again emphasizes the importance of viewing the human condition as a common field of description and interpretation for multiple disciplines. Where Bonhoeffer is particularly helpful is in providing us with an incarnational theological framework that takes seriously both God and the world, both the spiritual and the biological in the ethical task. Bonhoeffer offers us a "hermeneutics of human life" that can help integrate and orient our ethical questions.

Bonhoeffer and the Biosciences does not provide concrete answers to bioethical questions. Nor does it add significantly to contemporary Bonhoeffer scholarship or even hermeneutical theory. It probably will not attract a wide readership. It will be most helpful to scientists searching for a more nuanced theological framework that integrates theological and scientific knowledge in a way that genuinely respects the integrity and uniqueness of both.

Reviewed by Patrick S. Franklin, McMaster Divinity College, Hamilton, ON L8S 4K1.