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Contemporary Challenges in Christian Social Ethics

In a world which is ever changing, the ethical goalposts seem to be constantly moving, and all too often Christian Social Ethics ends up not simply shooting wide but apparently playing on a different pitch. In both the areas I want to highlight in this paper the Church has been accused of doing just that - of making pronouncements which are strong on prophecy and weak on any understanding of the context of the ethical dilemmas involved. The first is Business Ethics and the second is the contemporary Western debate about genetic research.

Business Ethics

Having started academic life in the USA, Business Ethics has now become established in Britain with interdisciplinary centres in London and Leeds Universities, amongst others. Though Christian Ethics played a big part in the founding on Business Ethics as an academic subject, there have been questions as to what part it can now play. Some writers have argued that Christian Social Ethics had nothing substantive to add to the contribution of philosophers. Others, including Peter Vardy, have questioned Church pronouncements such as the American Roman Catholic report *Economic Justice For All* (1986). Quite apart from any disagreements about concepts such as community and responsibility, Vardy argues that the Church cannot apply general principles directly to the world of business. Moreover, by implication, theologians are not qualified to pronounce on the world of business, speaking as they do from "a secure and problem free environment removed from business realities" (*Business Morality*, p.196ff) Underlying these questions is often a lack of trust, with business persons feeling the victims of negative judgments, and unaffirmed in their task. (see *The Corporation, A Theological Inquiry*, ed Michael Novak, p.203ff) Some affirmation has been attempted by writers such as Griffiths, Caldecote and Novak. They argue the importance of the market not simply as a means to efficiency, but also a means to greater freedom and creativity. This, in turn, demands protecting the freedom of the business person. In this context the business person becomes the servant who creates wealth for society and helps to handle and distribute resources in the most efficient way. Caldecote even argues that such work is "just as meritorious as in, for example, medicine and nursing, or social work for the disadvantaged, where direct benefits for the community can be more readily identified with the Christian duty to our neighbours" (*A Bias Against Business*, in Industrial Christian Fellowship, June 1990) The social responsibility of the business person is then precisely fulfilled in this service. All of this assumes the presence or the development of some ethical framework for the market.

There is no doubt that it is important to recognize the part that business plays in stewardship and allocation of resources. However, the attempt to tie "servanthood" in closely with the free market demands careful reflection.

Firstly, the concept of servanthood in Christian Ethics occurs within the context of the covenant community. As such the idea of servanthood cannot be restricted to the simple function of production without some responsibility for how the product is distributed, and what effect the production process might have upon the stakeholders ie. parties which have some stake or interest in the work process.

Secondly, analysis of the stakeholders reveals three levels of responsibility in business: individual, corporate and intercorporate. The first of these refers to the

responsibility of the individual for the well being of the company and beyond. This is exemplified by the tragedy of the Herald of Free Enterprise. The Sheen Report noted that several individuals in the workforce could have prevented the disaster but that none saw it as their responsibility to go beyond their specified tasks. The second level refers to the responsibility of the company. In the case of the Herald of Free Enterprise there was a clear attempt to deny corporate responsibility. It is, of course, difficult to arrive at a definition of the company analogous to a responsible individual. Even with a legal definition of responsibility, the task of proving liability is virtually impossible. The third level of the responsibility refers to that shared by several stakeholders, including other companies. The classic case here is in terms of pollution of the environment where it requires several stakeholders working together to ensure the clean up, eg. in inner cities.

A Christian perspective demands that all these levels of responsibility be explored. The denial of responsibility or the attempt to restrict responsibility to narrow areas is precisely where individual and corporate sin is allowed to develop, not least because it can so easily lead to a denial of humanity and of the moral claims of any of the stakeholders. Such responsibility does not, of course, imply that the company or the individual should actually solve all problems for the different stakeholders. It does, however, involve a careful examination of all the claims, and careful consideration of how all the stakeholders might be encouraged to fulfil their responsibilities in any work situation and what might be constraining them from so doing. This introduces the idea of social creativity, rather than the creativity of the individual entrepreneur advocated by Novak and others. Such a view of social creativity sees all stakeholders as potentially a part of the creative activity of work. This might mean altering the legal position of some stakeholders eg. the shareholders, who, at present, are not encouraged to act in a responsive or responsible way. (See my *Serving Society*, Grove Ethical Studies, no 86, p.23) It may mean more creative responses from companies to ensure that they do not take on the roles and responsibilities best fulfilled by other stakeholders. A good case in point is the controversy over Nestlé and breast milk substitute. Nestlé, at one time in this long running controversy, supplied not only the product but also the nurses whose task was to educate mothers both in breast feeding and, where appropriate, in the use of breast milk substitute. This took away the responsibility of the local governments and health providers, who in any case, because of lack of finance, were unable to fulfil it. It also led to the great suspicion that the "Nestlé nurses" were simply being used to advertise the product. Had Nestlé used the money spent on the nurses to empower the other stakeholders (using eg. the World Health Organization), an important part of the problem would have been solved. In cases such as Nestlé the stress on shared responsibility and creativity is not utopian but rather makes for "good business" in every sense of the term.

Christian Social Ethics then has a lot to contribute to this area. It offers a profound and complex view of responsibility which demands that business be more aware, responsive and creative. It looks to moral decision-making as community based and not individualistic. In the light of this it argues for the development of the skills and personal qualities that are necessary for such decision-making. It also argues for the development of a moral ethos within particular companies, and the kind of company organization that would enable all its members to participate in this. (See Justin Welby, *Can Companies Sin?* Grove Ethical Studies no. 85)

This debate takes business with ultimate seriousness because it treats all who are involved in the process as responsible moral decision-makers. In so doing, it also acknowledges the invaluable prophetic role that business itself could fulfil within society.

Genetic Research

With the world of genetics it is tempting to imagine that we have moved from the basic reality of work to the science fiction of Jurassic Park. Nothing could be further from the truth, as recent debates about the possibility of selecting the sex of future children and the discovery of a gene which may have some part in predisposing individuals to homosexuality demonstrate.

There are three broad areas which require attention: genetic engineering of microbes, plants and animals; the use of genetic techniques in human therapy; and the issues surrounding research and how the fruits of research are to be regulated. The first of these focuses on issues such as control, to ensure safety for the environment and humans, and distribution, eg. to ensure that the Third World is not manipulated.

The second area looks to the development of ways of combatting genetically linked diseases, such as haemophilia and Duchenne muscular dystrophy. Along with important strides in treatment there is the constant danger, expressed in the slippery slope argument, that such techniques as genetic screening may eventually lead to the development of eugenics. In a recent debate at a BMA conference some participants raised the argument that sex selection of future children should be allowed for second children on social grounds ie. to enable sex balanced families. The dangers of rights and consumer language filling out the meaning of "social grounds", such as in the Abortion Act, are evident. Ultimately, as Rahner notes, such activity takes away from the "givenness" of creation and begins to use persons as objects (*Theological Investigations* vol (p.244ff)

It is precisely this, often imperceptible, shift to dehumanizing which could provide the foundation for any development of eugenics.

The issue becomes more difficult when examining two kinds of gene therapy: Somatic-Cell and Germ-Line. The first of these affects only the individual being treated and not the germ-line cells,which influence future generations. Germ-Line therapy, something still being developed, would produce changes passed on to future generations. As such it would be a very efficient use of resources and lead to the possibility of reducing the prevalence of harmful genes. Those who are against this, however, argue that we do not have a clear idea of what the long-term medical consequences might be, and that once again the use of utilitarian moral criteria might open the door to a climate of thought in which eugenics could develop.

Underlying most of these points is the third area: how such techniques can be controlled and who is involved in making the decisions about regulation. The central stake holders would seem to be the scientists, many of whom argue for the freedom of scientific enquiry and the right to self regulation. In an era of great financial restraints, however, the concept of freedom of enquiry is becoming rarer, with research funding increasingly dependant upon the business world. In the 1980's, for instance, the Hoescht company contributed $50 million to molecular biology research at Harvard in return for exclusive licences on any products resulting from the research. This leads us back into the world of business and to some fundamental questions about rights, power and control. Is it acceptable for companies to patent living organisms, such as the famous Harvard mouse? How can the scientific world, with a stress on the tradition of open discussion, be reconciled to the world of business which demands that trade secrets be protected? How can acceptable distribution of the techniques be achieved in the context of competition?

Many of these questions are focused in the human genome project, a massive US enterprise which aims to map and sequence all the genetic information characteristics

of human beings. Once this is achieved there are questions about how the data would be used eg. in medical insurance, and which body would regulate the use.

This brings us once again to basic questions about responsibility and how the responsibilities of all the different stakeholders could be identified and worked through. This can be a complex activity, not least because, for example, "objective" scientists are often paid as consultants to major companies.

However, given the rapid pace of scientific progress, it is clear that the Church should be involved in trying to develop an open moral community in which all the stakeholders can share responsibility. Such responsibility should not simply involve setting up regulations and codes but also the development of social and spiritual awareness. In an ethical area which is ultimately about guarding against values and practices which could lead to dehumanizing behaviour, it is precisely at this level of the development of personal and spiritual qualities that the Church can contribute most effectively.

Simon Robinson

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