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Book Review: Christian Social Ethics

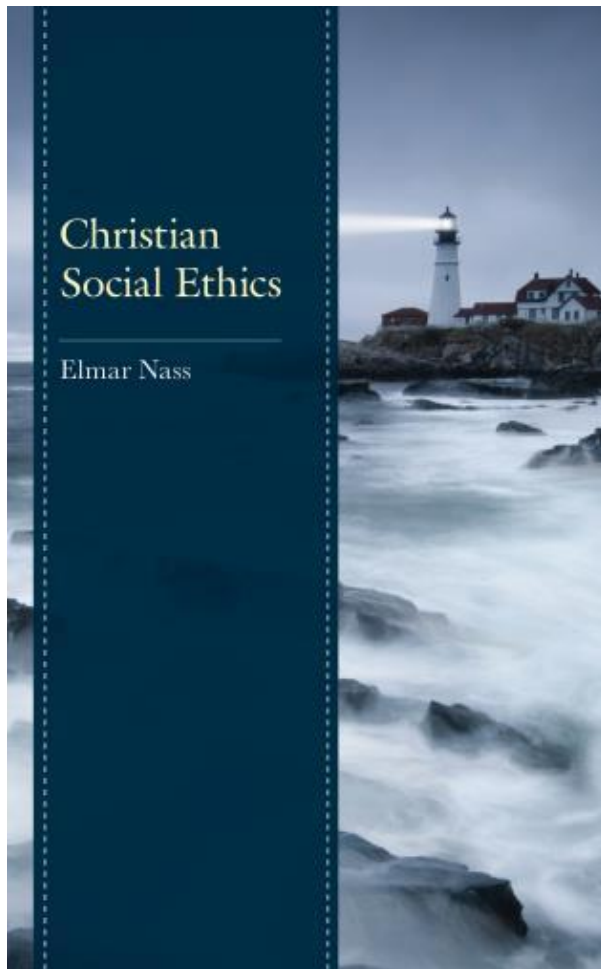
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BOOK REVIEW

Christian Social Ethics

Author: Elmar Nass

Publisher: Rowman & Littlefield (2023)

351 pages

<https://www.amazon.com/Christian-Social-Ethics-Elmar-Nass/dp/1538165260>

Reviewer: Monsignor Professor Dr. Obiora Ike

This ground-breaking book by renowned German social ethicist Professor Dr. Elmar Nass, published originally in Germany in 2020 and now translated for the English-speaking world in 2023, comes at a time of global uncertainties and disruptions. These new situations manifest trends even in the social sciences that emphasize *quantitative analysis* to such an extent that the question of *qualitative ethics* which contain principles guiding values for the social order lose their significance. As is already known, the challenge for “western liberal societies to become even more resilient in the face of growing totalitarianism” has become crucial

and indeed existential.

According to the author, the main reason for undertaking this research project is “*to provide a compass of social values to guide and enrich the liberal democratic soil of Western culture and fortify it against totalitarian ambitions*” (Preface p. xiii). The author makes a clarifying observation and his point of departure, namely that: “*the understanding of values in Western countries is in a state of upheaval. Christian orientation is losing importance. Secular ethics is gaining ground. Christian ethics is seeking to make its own contribution. The catholic tradition, in particular, is now increasingly on the defensive when it comes to answering societies most fundamental ethical questions*” (p. xiii).

Christian Social Ethics seeks to impart values on people to guide them toward responsible decisions in the face of dilemmas. *Ethics* focuses primarily on rules and human relationships. It promulgates its own normative foundations as a set of values (view of humanity and society, concept of human dignity, freedom, justice, etc.), inferring answers for such dilemmas from them (Introduction, p. xvii). *Christian Social Ethics* seeks to persuade people with its sound reasoning and arguments including position statements to facilitate decisions on social dilemmas. It can help put opposing positions into a common framework that makes productive exchange possible, at least theoretically, and in some cases, it might actually take place. That is a great contribution for building universal ethical guides for a social order that

preserves human freedoms and dignity and the common good. Prof Nass explains that the form of social ethics developed in his book “offers a powerful blueprint for shaping a liberal order based on a view of humanity and society, in honest dialogue with alternative worldviews and with orientations for tangible social issues” (p.xiii).

But there is currently is a serious situation where evidence emanating from social sciences research and orientation depict how empirical pragmatism has replaced ethical programmatic upon which moral and political decisions and rules for freedom and democracy took their source. Surely, not all peoples share the same views, as we find in a pluralistic society. People have different views regarding values on the one hand, and regarding the specific answers to dilemmas, on the other. Therefore, working on how a common ground – or at least an ethical orientation that protects human dignity, freedoms, the social order, and human rights – can be effected is a tall order and needs serious theoretical and ethical reflection.

The book is divided into three parts and contains thirteen chapters. Reading through the entire work of 351 pages, there is evident methodological presentation, logical and consistent reasoning, and a concise agenda that draws upon interdisciplinary sciences of philosophy, anthropology, sociology, economics, and theological sciences to justify the foundations for a free, just, and virtuous social order. Such a society is indeed desired by many across the globe in view of current disruptions to the social order. The author has hope for humanity in the sense that it is possible to work towards a free and healthy society if some comprehensive vision of the nature of the human person and society are established.

Part I (pp. 3–57) is dedicated to the theme of *Mission*. This Mission has to do with building a better world – one in which what is good in us is more fully realized. Professor Nass explores in four chapters a socio-philosophical and theological questioning on *the search for good* (pp. 3-10); *sanctification of the world* (pp.11-32); *ecumenical perspective* (pp. 33–49), and *the fact that in today’s world, this mission for a better world for everybody is indeed a Mission in crisis* (pp. 51–57). The crisis shows that in many parts of the world people are divided not only by character and background, but by basic understandings that extend not only to general principles, but to how concrete realities should be determined and interpreted. Questions on a three step-process for the clarification of ethical concepts applicable in any situation are raised. These are: “What is good? How can it be identified? How can it be made the standard of good living, as a compass to direct individual decisions or frame the rules of society? (p.3). Responses to these questions are grounded on principles established since the Middle Ages advising that in all circumstances, *good is to be pursued and evil avoided*. The many practical conclusions of this highly elucidating first section built around case studies and practical daily examples of the responses to the crisis phenomena: *Christians should confront not only the crisis of their missionary task in all its ramifications but also find substantial responses to it. Christian ethics must face the reality of secularism without secularizing itself...*” (p. 54).

Part II (pp. 59–122) is a highly scientific, theological, and philosophical exposé of the historical developments in the Western traditions over the centuries and reflects on how this **Mission** is carried out **in-and-through Dialogue**. Explored in four chapters with frank and open talk that is direct and confrontational to other points of view, such that are understood to undermine human dignity and freedoms, the section addresses *theological humanism beyond Christianity* (pp. 61–77); *normative humanism beyond Theology* (pp.79–94); *Ethics beyond normative humanism* (pp. 95–136); and *World authority for unconditional human dignity* (pp. 117–124).

There is courageous discourse of Christian values in dialogue with other religious, political, or philosophical thoughts in the plural and global environment of modern society. A review of the tenets of Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, and Anthroposophy is undertaken and a conclusion is offered to *build bridges in theological humanism* (p. 75). This direct dialogical engagement which does not avoid confrontation is raised also with specific world views such as National Socialism, Communism, Islamism, Secularism, and Nihilism. There is evidence that the tenets and attitudes of these ideologies on some fundamental questions of life, society, and human dignity (since the appendage “isms” are used), remain a matter a concern for further dialogue. The author proposes it is agreeable to accept that the common aim for dialogue must be to guarantee established values of respect for all-in-one united humanity. Such dialogue pursues a comprehensive and universally valid understanding and practice that ensures each human being possesses inalienable value simply and by virtue of being human, with corresponding dignity. This should absolutely exclude, under any justification whatsoever, any arbitrary actions towards human beings (p. 59). Professor Nass recommends *responsible dialogue* as a way to go, clarifying the difficulty of generalizations (p.61) in reference to the various philosophical and religious traditions. There is need also for differentiation and acknowledgment of plurality found even in Christianity, as also in Islam as it is not possible to speak of only one position of Islam (p. 61). *Yet, the Christian idea of humanity remains the starting point of Christian social ethics, which aim is to speak to people again with its social values and principles”* (p. 61).

Part III (pp. 123–280) – which is the last section of this book – deals with concrete contexts for the **Application** of this mission-in-dialogue. Since actions speak louder than words, the agenda needs to show how and what is required for the values to be translated into the daily concrete and practical contexts where human beings live. The author focuses on such topical and relevant issues, already identified by the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals - Agenda 2030 including *creation, justice, and peace* (125–153); *life, work, and death* (155 - 213); *economy and economic order* (215–280); *leadership and organizational culture* (281 – 306); *and future issues* (307–317). Undoubtedly, responsibility for creation is one of the most urgent issues facing humanity. Citing the encyclical letter *Laudato Si* of Pope Francis, the question of preservation of creation in the context of further issues of justice and peace are raised. People are invited to reflect on the need to move away from the current *culture of human self-destruction* and find reason for a bridge towards the divine, the essential through building human relationship with God, with nature and the human ecology (pp. 125-128). A new Order for society based on holistic human ecology is the normative instance of the divine plan with human beings (LS, 5, 13 & Nass, p. 129) is needed and made possible through new thinking by new people, many of them youth for whom the future belongs. Application is possible where an *international regiment of virtue* (p.130) *offering compass is accepted and internalized*. Social justice thrives in ethical climates. Our entire global environment is challenged with wars and threats that threaten entire survival of humankind through the potential use of nuclear weapons. Therefore, application of dialogue must address poverty, injustice, and inequality at all levels in line with established Christian values.

These Christian values are found in the good tradition and ideal for the family (pp. 155–164), still valid for the world and people of today, despite disruptions and contemporary challenges of globalization, migration, industrialization, economic realities, and emerging trends that even question the family and marriage. In the world of work which is a fundamental dimension of humankind’s existence on earth, value propositions for sanctification in active work, be it

gainful employment or volunteer work (p. 166). Work is always a commitment of humans to themselves, to society, and to God (Pope John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens* & Nass, p.171). Education is a thematic area for the application of this Compass for values and virtue, thus BILDUNG,¹ where holistic education is achieved: *Christian building of those in power, Justice for all, Solidarity of Christian people, extension of freedom of expression and raising awareness before rushing to war*" (p. 178). The author places focus on social ethical attention to the theme of death and dying in society and how a culture with giving death meaning in the context of life remains a veritable *special mirror from the perspective of Christian social ethics* (p. 196). The many ethical issues emanating from a search for elongating life on earth are discussed in detail with a compass for norms that serve humanity better.

A discussion on the *Economy* and *Economic Order* offers a compass for the market – the currency, property, and obligations emanating thereof with a choice between *ideal and pragmatism* (p. 229), making the Christian view of natural law ever more relevant and reasonable for all peoples and at this time. A compass of good leadership founded on the application of leadership ethics is evaluated and basic features of Christian leadership offered as guidance for steering society to a better future (p. 292). The Christian contribution to leadership is that the Church become a living example of leadership even within its own institutions as a model for the world. Such leadership ethics is premised on lived relationships in the professionally constituted Church. They include *the culture of leadership and interaction with one another particularly in three areas: personnel work, communication and motivation culture* (p. 293).

The book ends with Chapter 13 discussing *Future Issues* (pp. 307–320). Some of the questions for the future are issues relating to *autonomous weapons systems; peaceful international order; colonialism and neo-imperialism; migration and refugees; societies fight against sexualized violence; pandemic ethics; critical race theory; Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion; and the Black Lives Matter movement among others...*

Here, questions of an ethical evaluation of new technology in the age of digitalization, often controversial in many instances, take center stage for discussion. This is because there are associated problems they pose for human dignity, liberal society, and healthy democracies. Fundamental aspects of ethical technology are assessed and the dilemmas they pose evaluated in a cursory manner (p. 310). Professor Nass maintains that the normative starting point of Christian acceptability of these modern technologies is the Christian view of humanity. *The ultimate criterion is the ability of all persons to fulfill their God-given purpose of salvation according to the abilities given to them. Anything that serves this goal (including technology) is to be encouraged. Anything that contradicts it must be rejected* (p. 312).

A concluding summary of the unquantifiable contents of this book is difficult to make. What is easier to conclude is that the author, Professor Elmar Nass, succeeded to offer to any engaged reader from whichever tradition or philosophical or religious school of thought, a compelling conviction and logical argumentation proving the continued and permanent relevance of the Christian vision of humankind and society which perspectives offer humanity a guiding thread for reflection and action on the many issues facing humanity in the complex and disruptive world of today.

¹ Refers to the German tradition of self-cultivation (as related to the German concepts of creation, image, shape), wherein philosophy and education are linked in a manner that relates to a process of personal and cultural maturation.

There is no doubt, whatsoever, that ethical leadership is the call of the moment for all levels of those who guide and bear social, political, religious, economic, technological, traditional, and academic authority needed to guide humanity to a more prosperous and peaceful society. Professor Nass has eloquently established that Christian social ethics and its principles are guided by informed prudence focusing on the common good and the eternal truths received from God in the Christian theological reasoning. The foundations of such authority lie in human nature. Authority is exercised legitimately only when it seeks the common good of the group concerned and if it employs morally licit means to attain it. Good government promotes our ability to subsidiarity thinking and action, for example, through family law and promotion of appropriate education, and through support for relatively autonomous local, small-scale and informal institutions. As appropriate, the practice of the principle of promoting solidarity is encouraged when we concern ourselves with more distantly connected people, support them, and engage with them in common effort. Therefore, balancing subsidiarity with solidarity needs constant cohesion and dialogue. Public authority should neither neglect the common good nor try to determine the whole of social life in a sort of global bureaucracy. That excludes both libertarianism and socialism guiding principles. We pursue our own and others' good primarily through our own efforts and in cooperation with those whom we are closely connected.

The limitation of this work is already acknowledged by the author when he writes that there is a lack of completeness on major global issues as *the book was originally concentrated to responding to ethical and social questions emanating from the German speaking world* and does not lay claims to universal application of the contextual perspectives raised. There are certainly issues emanating from other regions of the world which the book does not address. Despite this, the author considers this book as *an invitation for other regions to identify and respond precisely to their regional contexts using the Christian perspectives and logical grounding developed in this work which indeed has laid good foundations for contextual reasoning towards applications and adaptations offering a universal socio-ethical basis for argumentation from the Christian perspective*. The hope is that the book becomes *a starting point for globally effective Christian social ethics that justifies liberal democracy and continues to advance it to address concrete social questions. Such effort of course counters a widespread self-secularization of Christian social ethics*.

About the Reviewer

Monsignor Professor Dr.Obiora Ike is a Professor of Ethics and Intercultural Studies at the Godfrey Okoye University in Enugu, Nigeria. He is the Founder and President of the Catholic Institute for Development, Justice, Peace, and Caritas (CIDJAP)(www.obioraike.cokm) and can be reached at obiorafike@gmail.com.