

# BOOK REVIEW

## Alcohol, Addiction and Christian Ethics (New Studies in Christian Ethics)

**Author: Cook, Christopher C. H.**

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A clinical bioethicist, conversing with Emergency Department staff about how to deal ethically with alcoholics and other addicts, seldom gets the opportunity to sit back and think about the ethical issues around alcohol and addiction. Hence, we tend to pick up the common language of social work and medicine (a disease) or fall back on a history of 'temperance, pledges, prohibition, and moral blame' from vague uncritical experience.

*Alcohol, Addiction and Christian Ethics* proved a most interesting read for two reasons. First, Christopher Cook speaks clearly as a Christian ethicist, probing the experience and reflection from 2000 years of Christian theology (including ethics) dealing with alcohol problems. He argues that Christian insight can be helpful in the public forum. Second, he gives a very clear ethical analysis out of Christian thought—which presents a number of varied approaches to the issues—in conjunction with present-day scientific insights concerning addiction. And while Cook focuses on alcohol because of its historical place in addiction, what he says can be extrapolated for other addictive behaviours so common in our society.

Cook's first chapter outlines the present-day medical and scientific approach to alcohol use, misuse and dependency. He then summarizes the ethical evaluation of four Christian thinkers of the past (Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Luther, and George Whitefield) concerning the same. Their perspectives are fascinating—from an awareness of the alcohol-dependent person's distance from God and what would be considered the higher values of human living to consequentialist analyses of harm to self, family and society. Of considerable interest are the insights, which Cook probes later in the book, of St. Paul and Augustine from their own personal experience about the 'divided self' or 'divided will' which they present as part of the human experience of wanting and not wanting at the same time.

Cook's historical study about the 19th and 20th century Christian responses to alcohol abuse is clear and insightful. The problem of severe alcoholism and its pervasiveness in society pushed thinkers in two directions—those who argued that alcohol was a good (created by God) to be used in moderation and those who argued that it was either evil (because of its effects) or uncontrollable and therefore should be completely renounced and even banned from society. The first position, following the thought of Aquinas, built upon the Aristotelian understanding of the virtue of temperance as moderation. The second, ironically, gave the word 'temperance' a completely new meaning now associated with the notion of total abstinence. Both perspectives had considerable influence on the practical realities of U.K. and North American moral, legislative, and cultural responses to alcohol abuse and dependency.

Cook is also a careful-enough theologian to explore some of the Scriptural evidence for Christian ethical thought. It seems obvious that wine is both praised in the Hebrew Scriptures (Prov. 23:29-35) and taken for granted in the Christian Scriptures. Efforts by some Christian apologists to replace the notion of wine with 'grape juice' (non-alcoholic) rightly go nowhere with Cook who cannot help but note Jesus' first miracle in the Gospel of John—creating 120 gallons of wine for guests who had already been drinking! One sees the Christian ambivalence towards alcohol in both the Scriptures and tradition—it (usually in the form of wine) is a both a delight or a gift from God and a danger due to drunkenness and all the failings that flow from drunken behaviour and addiction.

As a Christian ethicist Cook summarizes his position on alcohol in a fine argument taking the best from his theological forebearers. He comes down on the side of moderation, with an awareness of the individual ethical stance of abstinence. He is unafraid to analyze the issue at one point in terms of sin (yes, he does use the word!) but he is careful to avoid the old 'moral model' of condemning the alcoholic as a sinner (we all are sinners, in Cook's

excellent analysis of the divided will). He also respects modern science and such movements as AA insofar as they continue to help the addicted. And he raises significant challenges around social policy by questioning more deeply some of the special interests that exacerbate alcohol use, like industry profit and government collaboration.

In my experience as a theologian, a number of philosophically based ethicists, when they take the time to read theological ethics, are surprised to see the depth of reasoning and logic espoused by theologians. The stereotypes of Christians quoting the Bible or the Pope as their foundations goes by the wayside here, validating Cook's premise that theological reflection on such ethical issues really can help our entire society face the problems raised. Those who do not share the Christian faith may well struggle with the meaning of theological concepts such as 'sin,' 'salvation,' and the 'summum bonum' of Augustine. But they must nonetheless come to terms with the purposes (the teleology) of human life and the brokenness that is seen so profoundly in addictions and their accompanying behaviour. Scientific conclusions about addictive behaviour and possible treatments may try to avoid such questions in a pragmatic and supposed value-neutral approach. However, values permeate all human action; and religious explanations, it seems to me, have as much right to our reasoned approach to life as presumptions hidden behind scientific reasoning.

Good historical study always broadens one's perspectives. This volume is no exception. Even more valuable, however, is the clear presentation of arguments and positions which the fair reader will recognize as providing valuable insights into a personal and social problem that has been around a long time.

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