

***Christian Ethics and the Human Person:
Truth and Relativism in Contemporary Moral Theology***

by Peter Bristow

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Reverend Peter Bristow has set himself a challenging task: to convey to the modern mind, steeped in relativism, the perennial attractiveness of Catholic moral teaching. Simply to restate the virtue ethics of Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas, no matter how excellent, he surmised, would not be sufficient, because its objectivity does not take into account the modern turn to the subject. The writings of Pope John Paul II provide him with the inspiration for a new approach to ethics. Since an ethics of the first person, not the third, entails a treatise as much on the nature of man as on ethics, Bristow has devoted several chapters to philosophical and theological anthropology. Like much of John Paul II's writing on ethics, the book is also a response to the widespread dissent over the Church's teaching on sexual ethics in the 1968 encyclical *Humanae vitae*. Having received his doctorate of theology from the University of Navarre, and as the author of *The Moral Dignity of Man* and a professor of Christian ethics at Maryvale Institute, Bristow is well fitted for the task.

At the root of modern thinking on the nature of the person is the dualism of John Locke, who described man as "a thinking intelligent being, that has reason and reflection, and can consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing, in different times and places" (86). Like Descartes' "I think, therefore I am," this definition, Bristow notes, is more psychological than metaphysical. The body is nowhere in play. As a result, the body appears to be a mere appendage of the spiritual faculties, with grave consequences to man's dignity, especially in the sexual realm. If the

body, Bristow says, is not part of man's being in a metaphysics of being, there can be no true understanding of either natural law or the moral law.

Bristow divides the book into four parts: (1) Fundamental Principles of Ethics, (2) Controversy and Renewal, (3) Biblical Ethics, and (4) Special Questions: Gender, Contraception and the Renewal of Marriage. Part 1 is a masterly exposition of the renewal of ethics after Vatican Council II, based on the dignity of the human person and citing the council document *Dignitatis humanae*, which stresses contemporary man's increasing consciousness of his dignity. Indeed, for Bristow, man's dignity is the touchstone for judging inadequate anthropologies and moral theories such as utilitarianism, consequentialism, and proportionalism (discussed in part 2) as well as for presenting a Christian ethics that conforms to reason and the true nature of the human person as a unity of body and soul.

Bristow has thoroughly absorbed the way John Paul II integrates Aristotle's understanding of the role of practical reason in the ethical act with the phenomenological insistence that act cannot be separated from experience. Ethics not only starts from experience but is rooted in it. Experience, however, cannot be separated from a metaphysics of being, truth, or the good. By including the subject's conscious experience of his own causality in the act, John Paul II shows how the person *experiences* the way the act changes something not only in the external world but in himself, so that he becomes either good or bad by the act. Being,

truth, and the good are inextricably intertwined, with implications for the dignity and authority of conscience. Anyone interested in a cogent summary of Christian ethics, based on reasoned argument, could not do better than to read part 1.

Only by seeking a goal worthy of human dignity can a person find fulfillment. To know what that goal might be, Bristow turns to anthropology. Here, with John Paul II, he makes the critical distinction between person and nature. The person transcends nature and the natural inclinations. This was already known by Aquinas, for whom “the natural law is known by reason in conjunction with the ‘nature of the human person’ which is very different from saying it is known by human nature” (83). For John Paul II, “the basic goods of the human person,” Bristow says, citing *Veritatis splendor*, nn. 78–79, “get their normative value from their link with the good of the person” (90). And the good of the person *qua* person is the perfection of the person. The dignity of the human person underlies the inviolability of the human person not simply the inclination to preserve human life. In this way a distinction is made between goods *of* the person, such as freedom, love, and enjoyment, and goods *for* the person, goods such as the biological goods of sex and procreation. The modern emphasis on the person has also brought to the fore the relational nature of the human person, beyond simply his social nature. The “law of the gift” which depends on the inviolability and incommunicability of the human person was linked to the nature of divine Trinitarian communion by *Gaudium et spes* n. 24. “The person,” says Bristow, “does not transcend other persons but is open to them, he communicates himself to them, he is able to love and be loved by them” (97). Indeed, only through self-possession and self-gift can the person find fulfillment.

The chapter titled “Biblical Foundations: Law and Evangelical Grace,” in part 3, is a succinct account of the role of revelation in Christian ethics. Although right reason can discern the path to true human fulfillment, man, because of his fallen nature, cannot achieve it without grace. Bristow explains

how man lost the happiness and liberty of original innocence in Eden by questioning God as the source of the moral law, which is, in truth, a law of love. God did not leave man in his ignorance and sinfulness but promised a redeemer. Bristow’s exposition of the covenants God established with his chosen people, moving from the external law of the Ten Commandments to a more interior law, written on their hearts, captures in a few brief pages the path that prepared the people for Christ as the fulfillment of the law. The new law of grace and charity is the gift of the Holy Spirit, which man receives but does not merit. This chapter is particularly helpful for explaining how the new law is the work of the Holy Spirit dwelling in the soul and moving the person to transformation. Subject to this law, the Christian now acts out of love, not fear, and gains a true freedom, by grace and a life of virtue. All this is made possible through the sacraments of Christ’s body, the Church.

This sets the stage for the chapter on the virtues, the other chapter in part 3. The cardinal virtues, as defined by Aquinas, following Aristotle, perfect and guide a person’s behavior. The human virtues of prudence, justice, temperance, and fortitude are all discovered by reason. Bristow brings to bear John Paul II’s recovery, in *Veritatis splendor*, of the place of the virtues in the moral life, showing how they conform to man’s true good and individual liberty. Anyone wishing for a brief refresher course on the virtues could well find it here, together with an account of the supernatural virtues of faith, hope, and charity, the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and the beatitudes. The freedom of the new law harks back to the chapter on contemporary notions of freedom, autonomy, and truth. The human person is by nature ordered to the good. Therefore, freedom cannot simply consist in the right to respond to instinct or emotion separate from human reason. It is, rather, freedom for excellence. Above all, true freedom must respect the dignity of the human person, a unity of body and soul.

This brings us to the final chapters on the body, in part 4, which have a particular

relevance to Catholic bioethics. Here Bristow spells out the anthropology of John Paul II's theology of the body, gleaned from the Genesis text in Scripture. Only if we understand God's plan for the creation of man and woman can we understand the meaning of sexuality and gender. It is against this backdrop that Bristow critiques as inadequate current feminist anthropologies. The woman's body has been a particular target of reproductive technologies, from in vitro fertilization to surrogate motherhood.

The body is deeply implicated in the topic of the penultimate chapter, on *Humanae vitae*. Bristow clarifies some misunderstandings, especially in this statement "The body, rather than part of 'nature' or the 'natural world,' is part of the subjectivity of the person and therefore pertains not to the domination of nature but to the mastery of oneself" (341). Where through contraception man dominates nature, through periodic abstinence he conquers himself. Finally, Bristow shows the significance of the Church's moral teaching to evangelization.

A brief review can barely describe even the surface of the riches to be found in Bristow's comprehensive overview of the renewal of moral theology according to John Paul II since Vatican Council II. Bristow's book both draws on the wealth of the Catholic Tradition and responds to the seductive arguments of our culture of relativism. Eminently readable, it provides an invaluable grounding in Christian anthropology for those engaged in current pressing bioethical issues.

MARY SHIVANANDAN

Mary Shivanandan, STD, is a retired professor of theology at the John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family in Washington, DC, where she was also associate dean. She is the author of Crossing the Threshold of Love: A New Vision of Marriage (Catholic University of America Press, 1999). This review is based on a shorter one dated November 5, 2010, that appeared on the Christendom Awake! website, at <http://www.christendom-awake.org/pages/pbristow/ce&hp/ce&hp-reviews1.htm>.
