

ABSTRACT

Boer, Th.A., 1997, *Theological Ethics After Gustafson. Ethics A Critical Analysis of James M. Gustafson's Theocentric Ethics*. Kampen, 310 pp. + xi. ISBN

The aim of the present investigation is to provide a comprehensive and critical analysis of the ethics of James M. Gustafson. Gustafson has developed a model of moral reasoning that has become known as "Theocentric Ethics." It criticizes the anthropocentric character in many historical and contemporary ethics, both theological and philosophical. His normative ethics is based upon four sources: historical Christian beliefs, philosophical methods and principles, the results of modern natural sciences, and human experience broadly conceived. In regard to methodology, his theological ethics is essentially experience-based. But although it rejects revelational claims, a functional equivalent to revelation can be found in the form of religious piety. The result is a worldview that stresses God's sovereignty and the marginal place of mankind in the history of the universe. For normative ethics, theocentrism means that human beings should divert their attention from human well-being as the primary or only object of moral concern to the well-being of the whole of creation.

This investigation is critical about a number of epistemological and methodological elements in Theocentric Ethics. Scientific theories about the origin and the end of the universe are shown to have a decisive impact on the content of Gustafson's theology. In his use of scientific theories, Gustafson overlooks the disagreements among scholars in the natural sciences, and on a number of occasions, there seems not to be a sufficient distinction between "facts" and "interpretations." The use of the historic sources for Christianity—both Scripture and tradition—can be criticized for being highly eclectic. Furthermore, we argue that the concept of an impersonal God who nevertheless "commands" and has moral relevance, is problematic. On the basis of the analysis and critique of Gustafson's Theocentric Ethics, this study gives an outline of some elements of a Reformed theological ethics "after Gustafson." This is done on the basis of the Reformed tradition, taking into consideration Troeltsch's integration criterion which says that theological statements may not run counter to established scientific facts.

The investigation especially highlights the relation between ethics and worldview. Although Theocentric Ethics is a theistic construal, its elaboration of the relation theology to ethics, of "is" to "ought," is applicable to the relation between any worldview and ethics. This is based on the realist character of his theology. As theology "says something about how things really and ultimately are," the relation of theology to ethics can serve as a model for any "is" to "ought" relationship. In agreement with Gustafson, this study argues that applied ethics and ultimate theoretical convictions can be separated only at our peril.

*Key words:* Calvinism, epistemology, James M. Gustafson, nature, Theocentric Ethics, worldview.