

## *Rich in diversity, scholarship and personal testimony*

*Human Rights and the Common Good: Christian Perspectives*

edited by Bill Atkin and Katrine Evans

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THIS BOOK CONTAINS A number of papers originally presented at a symposium on the subject of Human Rights and the Common Good which was held at the Stout Research Centre in July 1998. The papers, which are diverse in both their subject matter and approach, vary in length and scholarly quality.

The first paper by Christopher Marshall of the Bible College in Auckland is a tour de force demonstrating a clear grasp of the various secular and Christian human rights traditions. It is elegantly written and stands as a distinguished contribution to the debate, particularly in the area of the potential biblical contribution to human rights discourse. Indeed, Marshall's paper is so replete with ideas and insights, careful re-reading is a necessity.

Dr Mary Eastham's essay offers a critique of traditional notions of human rights from the perspective of the writings of Gustavo Gutiérrez, who is rightly regarded as the father of liberation theology. Gutiérrez's project is to construct a theology of the poor by an application of critical Marxist theory, and Dr Eastham conveys the flavour of the dialectic well. Excessive reliance on Gutiérrez's writing seems, however, to have produced some misunder-

standing. To describe Bartolomé de Las Casas as an 'indigenous visionary' who 'dedicated his life to reclaiming the perspective of the poor in Peruvian history' is historically inaccurate, while the description of Francisco de Vitoria as a 'Jesuit' is simply wrong. Vitoria was a Dominican who was Prima Professor of Theology at Salamanca and confessor to Charles V.

Marshall and Eastham's papers are followed by critiques by Judith McKinlay of the University of Otago and Gavin Drew of the Bible Society. McKinlay's short paper draws together the themes of the preceding papers, highlighting some of the problems associated with the different authors' perspectives, while Drew, in a lengthier piece, stakes out the ground from a more personal, evangelical viewpoint. Fr Neil Vaney's essay elegantly narrates the genesis of, retreat from and return to human rights thinking in the Catholic Church. This is the only paper to deal with the theological foundations of the common good in a systematic way and is therefore a valuable contribution to the work.

The last four papers deal with various aspects of human rights. The Honourable Justice Eddie Durie supports the adoption of a written

constitution for New Zealand based on a shared Christian ethic, while Major Campbell Roberts of the Salvation Army reflects on rights and responsibilities primarily in an economic context. Grant Gillett, who is Professor of Biomedical Ethics at the University of Otago, conducts a short examination of the relationship of rights to limited resources, concluding that insufficient consideration is given to the distribution of social goods in New Zealand. The whole is concluded with a commentary by Jonathan Boston, who seems happier analysing the policy implications of the various papers rather than their theological dimensions, and with an elaboration of, and comment upon, the themes of the conference presumably prepared by the editors.

This is a book which is rich in its diversity, scholarship and personal testimony. It provides much valuable material for those who wish to think more deeply about human rights in New Zealand and how they might be informed and developed through the varieties of Christian experience. The organisers of the original symposium are to be congratulated for bringing together such a well-qualified group of participants and the editors of this book are also to be applauded for making the work of those participants available to a wider audience. ☞

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