

## Review of *Covenant and Communication: A Christian Moral Conversation with Jürgen Habermas*

BY HAK JOON LEE

*Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2006. 233 pp. \$33.00.*

Hak Joon Lee develops what he calls “covenantal-communicative ethics” by synthesizing the discourse ethics of Jürgen Habermas with Trinitarian theology and Reformed notions of covenant. He tests and extends this model through conversations with Stanley Hauerwas, David Hollenbach, and liberation theology. While these conversations would benefit from careful attention to more recent work in Christian ethics, the hope that animates Lee’s project remains important.

Lee’s analysis begins with a familiar portrait of global society in crisis. Pervasive pluralism and historical consciousness undermine both the legitimacy of liberal institutions and the motivation of citizens to participate in them. A refusal to judge between cultures leads to a shortsighted relativism that cannot sustain even basic notions of human rights. An argument for the superiority of a particular culture and its products—the kind of argument some neoconservatives make for “the West”—quickly becomes a kind of fundamentalism. The result, Lee writes, is that relativism and fundamentalism threaten to divide the world between them—with neither able to provide the “shared moral criteria” necessary to keep global society from becoming “an animalistic jungle” (213).

Lee sees the beginning of a path around the jungle in the discourse ethics of Jürgen Habermas. Habermas’s notion of the ideal speech opens reason to a universal horizon even as it acknowledges that reasoning exists only in contingent and particular contexts. Such reason, both historically situated and universal, can offer cross-cultural legitimation of liberal institutions and ideals—but only if it is supplemented by religious traditions. Lee argues that Habermas’s discourse ethics needs religious traditions for “socialization and identity formation” of citizens (40–41), for symbolic language that can rejuvenate the “life-world” (43), and to sustain a dialectic between the right and the good (46). Religious traditions carry intuitions of a community beyond the present linguistic community (11–12). They can provide an “external moral reality” that gives meaning and continuity to successive moral inquiries (112). While almost all of these arguments have already appeared elsewhere, Lee serves the reader by gathering them together here.

Even at their strongest, these arguments for a religious supplement to discourse ethics demand only something more than the sum of human communication. They do not specifically warrant Lee's turn to Trinity and covenant. Lee assumes commitments to these doctrines; he is less concerned to justify them than he is to show that they can be synthesized with Habermas's communicative ethics without too much damage (see, e.g., 51). This book will be most appealing to Christians—especially Reformed Christians—looking for ways to translate core faith commitments into public arguments for liberal institutions.

The form and content of the book begin to come together as Lee develops his covenantal-communicative ethics in conversation with some important figures in contemporary Christian ethics. Ironically, for a book that stresses communication, these exchanges are marked by failures of listening. Too often Lee converses with caricatures. His engagement with Stanley Hauerwas, for instance, depends on the well-worn image of Hauerwas as a sectarian incapable of public theology. The charge might stick, but it has been made for more than two decades, and a book published in 2006 needs to take seriously both Hauerwas's replies and the real public effects of his work. Lee's conversation with David Hollenbach relies on an even older caricature. He argues that Hollenbach's efforts to reconstitute human rights by appeal to Roman Catholic notions of the common good are inevitably infected by the "authoritarian structure of the Catholic Church" (181). "The Catholic Church," Lee writes, "shuns the democratic process—discussion, criticism, and argumentation" (181). Such an assessment is far too flat for an institution as old, broad, and variegated as the Catholic Church. More sharply: This imputation of guilt by association short-circuits any serious engagement with Hollenbach and so fails to meet the communicative standards of Lee's own proposal. Lee's engagement with liberation theology is also thin. He lumps the entirety of this diverse and evolving movement under the sign of monocausal analysis and a preference for violence over communication. He offers no sustained attention to any individual figure (196–202).

Lee's conversations with Habermas rise to a higher standard of communication. Lee draws widely from primary and secondary sources to present a clear, digressive summary of some important aspects of Habermas's thought. The summaries are clear in part because Lee presents Habermas systematically and synchronically. But these same strategies lead him to neglect change and development in Habermas's thinking—especially since September 11, 2001. Lee describes a Habermas who believes that a secularizing process of social learning—the "linguistification of the sacred"—has led to the transformation of every religious resource into some communicative good. He writes, Habermas "does not respect any positive role which religious groups may play in the public realm" (37).

This is exactly the view Habermas rejected in both word and act in his January 2004 conversation with Joseph Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict XVI). In the conversation, Habermas sketched an ongoing role for religious traditions

to play in modern, public discourse. Religions play this role best not only as sources of liberal ideals but also as incompletely assimilated alternatives. Religious traditions, Habermas said, preserve “something that has elsewhere been lost.” They carry intuitions about the sacred worth of every individual, the importance of justice for the poor, and the possibility of eschatological hope. They are worthy not only of tolerance, Habermas said, but also of full engagement in “a complementary learning process”—a process of conversation and cross-examination very much like the one Lee advocates. Habermas has clearly been moving in this direction since his 2001 acceptance speech for the Peace Prize awarded by the German Publishers and Booksellers Association. Eduardo Mendieta assembles an even longer narrative of development of this position in *Religion and Rationality* (2002). If Lee had listened more carefully to more recent work by and about Habermas, he might have heard a voice that harmonized more easily with his own.

These lapses in communication do not undermine Lee’s ambitious project. On the contrary, they underscore the importance of the attentive communication for which he argues. They also suggest that Lee might have more allies than he knew: Habermas and Hollenbach, certainly, but also liberation theologians such as Pablo Richard. And if Hauerwas is not an easy ally, he is, like Ratzinger, the kind of theologian Habermas might find interesting. The conversation might be contentious, but Lee is not alone in his great hope that dialogue between religious and secular traditions might contribute to the renewal of global civil society.

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## Review of *A Moral Creed for All Christians*

BY DANIEL C. MAGUIRE

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Maguire casts his book as a moral, rather than a dogmatic, creed for all Christians, but surprisingly the actual text of his proposed creed, which also functions as the book’s thesis (6–7), does not actually mention Jesus Christ. Certainly Christians could embrace this moral creed, but then so too could Unitarians, Buddhists, Hindus, humanists, Hare Krishna, and a host of others who would