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In the conventional analysis of human behaviour, power and ethics are frequently considered contrary principles, in that power enforces, while ethics elicits a free response. But, as James Mackey forcefully shows, a more adventurous philosophical study of human morality escapes the sense of contraries, and sets us instead on a quest for the kind of power that liberates human creativity. It then becomes possible to establish the framework for a critical assessment of the kind of power that ought to be operative in the major structures of human society, civil or ecclesiastical, state governments and church hierarchies. Mackey analyses the religious question which then quite naturally emerges, as to whether this Eros-type power so manifest in human society originates from beyond the more empirical structures of churches, states, and 'nature'; and the effort to detect the specifically Christian characterisation of an allegedly ultimate power working in us for final well-being finds its natural context.

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NEW STUDIES IN CHRISTIAN ETHICS

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In recent years the study of Christian ethics has become an integral part of mainstream theological studies. The reasons for this are not hard to detect. It has become a more widely held view that Christian ethics is actually central to Christian theology as a whole. Theologians increasingly have had to ask what contemporary relevance their discipline has in a context where religious belief is on the wane, and whether Christian ethics (that is, an ethics based on the Gospel of Jesus Christ) has anything to say in a multi-faceted and complex secular society. There is now no shortage of books on most substantive moral issues, written from a wide variety of theological positions. However, what is lacking are books within Christian ethics which are taken at all seriously by those engaged in the wider secular debate. Too few are methodologically substantial; too few have an informed knowledge of parallel discussions in philosophy or the social sciences. This series attempts to remedy the situation. The aims of *New Studies in Christian Ethics* will therefore be twofold. First, to engage centrally with the secular moral debate at the highest possible intellectual level; second, to demonstrate that Christian ethics can make a distinctive contribution to this debate – either in moral substance, or in terms of underlying moral justifications. It is hoped that the series as a whole will make a substantial contribution to the discipline.

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Contents

<i>General editor's preface</i>	<i>page</i> ix
1 The anatomy of power	1
Types of sovereignty, types of church	13
2 The anatomy of morals	38
The genesis of moral values	56
Power and morality: an interim conclusion	72
3 Powers secular and powers sacred	82
Morality and religion	86
The powers that be	97
States and power secular	108
Churches and power sacred	129
Conclusion	147
4 The Christian experience of power	151
5 The anatomy of church	181
Conclusion: Of Christian churches and secular states	206
<i>Notes</i>	219
<i>Select bibliography</i>	234
<i>Index of names</i>	238
<i>Subject index</i>	240

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[More information](#)

General editor's preface

This is the third monograph to appear in the *New Studies in Christian Ethics* series. It fits very well the interdisciplinary nature of the series, and is written by one of the most significant theologians in Britain today.

The theme of power has been a sub-text of Professor James Mackey's writings for more than a decade. It is present in the early chapters of his major study *The Christian Experience of God as Trinity*. It is more prominent in his *Modern Theology* and indeed in his innovative and most recent work in Celtic theology. He is a philosopher by training and background, but through the influence of writers such as Alasdair MacIntyre he has also read deeply in the social sciences. His range of scholarship is broad, but he always brings to his writings insights that are clearly his own. Sharp observations – sometimes eirenic, but more often polemical – appear on almost every page of his writings.

For James Mackey power is to be located on a spectrum between force and authority. On moral grounds power exercised as authority is usually to be preferred to power exercised as force, since the latter tends to eliminate the possibility of genuinely moral behaviour. At most, power exercised as force should be used to protect the perimeters of the area within which moral agents are to act. Once individuals are coerced (through secular or ecclesial means) they are no longer free to act as moral agents. Yet ironically both states and churches have long histories of attempting to coerce individuals in areas which might otherwise be fertile ground for moral creativity.

Implicit within this understanding of power in society are a

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x

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number of presuppositions about the nature of morality and about Christianity. James Mackey expertly unpacks these presuppositions, arguing that morality is a creative way of interacting with the world, rather than a constrained way of following rules. In addition, the accretion of power exercised as force – not just the propensity of the Catholic Church, but also of many Reformed Churches – he sees as quite alien to the world of the New Testament. The use of force and fear he maintains to be incompatible with the true nature of Christianity.

This is a challenging and uncomfortable book for secularists and religious believers alike. If Professor Mackey argues for the moral significance of religious communities in present-day society, he is also fully aware of their historical frailties. He remains a committed, but critical, Catholic.

In short, this is a powerful book. Its theme is power and it is also written by one who has obvious moral and intellectual authority/power.

ROBIN GILL