Wolfgang Huber


Wolfgang Huber is widely known and respected as a retired Protestant Bishop of Berlin and Brandenburg as well as a former Chairperson of the Council of the Protestant Church in Germany. His contributions to both church and public life are well-known. For decades, he has represented public theology at its best, as the preface by the series editor in this volume rightly claims. He is, however, also widely respected as theologian and social ethicist. His academic work for example included issues of peace and violence, justice, human dignity and human rights, democracy and tolerance.

In particular, however, over many years he contributed to questions concerning responsibility and freedom. It is therefore indeed fitting that this collection of his essays brings together different essays related to responsibility and freedom. He very deliberately developed his social ethics as an ethics of responsibility, in conversation with, amongst others, Max Weber, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Hannah Arendt, and Hans Jonas. This volume therefore very helpfully opens with a key essay called “Towards an ethics of responsibility.” Again, he also develops his social ethics as an ethics of freedom, or even more specifically, in his own terminology, an ethics of communicative freedom. The volume includes a key text in this regard as well, namely his early statement, “Freedom and institution: Social ethics as ethics of communicative freedom.” It is therefore not surprising that the impressive Festschrift honouring Huber on the occasion of his sixtieth birthday also had the title Freiheit verantworten (Gütersloher Verlagshaus 2002). For him, the two themes of responsibility and freedom are intimately intertwined and together describe the orientation of Christian ethics.

Many of Huber’s important papers and speeches are not yet available in English, and at any rate not published together in one collection. That alone already makes this volume a very helpful contribution to ethical scholarship today. Several of these essays have been translated specifically for this occasion, an effort which is to be strongly recommended. It is noteworthy that a collection of his essays has also recently appeared in German, also focusing on the theme of freedom, called Von der Freiheit. Perspektiven für eine solidarische Welt (Verlag C.H. Beck, 2012). Three of the seminal essays in fact appear in both volumes, including the two already mentioned.

The subtitle helpfully points to several central themes in the essays collected in the English volume. Huber is concerned with the future, and often reflects on
hope—or the seeming lack of hope in particular socio-historical contexts. He asks about the challenges that we face in the present with a view to the future as well as the challenges that call to lives of responsibility. He understands these challenges in the light of his analysis of contemporary societies, and from where he lives and observes the world, he describes life today as a pluralistic life. He explains that he is no longer impressed by notions of multi-culturalism, since our individualities are far too complex to be reduced to only the cultural traditions that impact on us. In pluralistic societies, he argues in another key essay, Christian ethics helps us rather to respect the dignity of the different. For him, this forms the central challenge for many of us today.

The volume includes thirteen essays, divided into three sections, respectively called “Ethics of Freedom,” “Freedom in Society,” and “Consequences of Freedom.” The first section includes the three fundamental essays already mentioned, in addition to a paper in memory of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, called “Answering for the past, shaping the future.” Huber has been a leading Bonhoeffer scholar over decades, also active in the publication of his collected works. The second section deals with major themes of faith and politics—freedom in liberal societies, faith and politics in European debates, the place and role of confession of faith in political life, and the nature and complexity of tolerance. Again, the tradition of the Theological Declaration of Barmen is clearly at the background of some of these essays. The third and final section then covers even more specific public issues, coming from different phases of his career as ethicist, church leader and public figure: justice, peace and the integrity of creation in ecumenical social thought, debates about the rights and/or dignity of nature, how the church can contribute to overcome violence, and finally, the possibilities and limitations of different humanist discourses.

The editor is Willem Fourie, a Senior Lecturer in Christian Ethics at the University of Pretoria in South Africa. He is well-equipped to make such a compilation. He wrote his doctoral dissertation on Huber's ethics, called Communicative Freedom. Wolfgang Huber's Theological Proposal and published in the same series, as Volume 3.

According to the Series Editor in an earlier volume, the series is intended “as an explicit signal for the future development of the paradigm of public theology in the horizon of the one world.” There is no doubt that this volume contributes very well to that purpose. Over many years, Huber had an intimate relation with South Africa, addressing ecumenical gatherings, leading official delegations, speaking as a visiting scholar, being invited as research fellow, contributing to public discourse and church life. It is therefore fitting that five of the thirteen essays selected by Fourie have some link to South Africa, namely: a contribution to a South African Festschrift, an academic lecture, two public lectures, and a