

very practically and imaginatively, in contributions to a series which should certainly challenge readers in theology departments but also anyone, believer or otherwise, who would like to know something about the best that is happening in American theology today.

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**CHRISTIAN ETHICS. AN INTRODUCTION:** edited by Bernard Hoose, Cassell, London, 1998, xiv + 337pp, Hb. £55, Pb. £20.

As Vincent MacNamara says in his contribution to this book 'there are different levels of moral discourse' (p.158). This is one of the difficulties facing a project such as this, which seeks to offer an introduction to the various elements of Christian ethics. The solution chosen here is to provide two parts, the first on 'Basic Christian ethics', the second on 'Applied ethics', this latter being further sub-divided into 'social ethics', 'interpersonal and sexual ethics' and 'medical ethics'. But even within these two parts the various levels of discourse inevitably imply further distinctions.

A second difficulty in introducing people to moral theology is deciding where to begin. Half of Part One's ten chapters deal with the moral agent and this, I think, is a good place to begin (although the chapters I refer to are scattered throughout Part One). So there are very good chapters on virtue ethics (James F. Keenan), the human person (Joseph Selling), conscience (Richard M. Gula), natural law (Gerard J. Hughes) and feminist ethics (Susan F. Parsons). Parsons summarises well the concerns which have encouraged many to study virtue ethics whether in reaction to what is considered 'patriarchal morality' or because of more general doubts about the kind of thing the moral agent becomes in modern thought. Specifically the individualism of much moral thinking needs to be corrected by a relational or social view of the human person, modern notions of rationality need to be corrected by a renewed appreciation of the holistic character of being human (body, feelings), and the concern with autonomous control needs to be calmed somehow, leaving room for vulnerability and compassion.

Part One begins in fact with a contribution by Tom Deidun on the Bible and Christian ethics. There is the usual 'dark night of the soul' for the non-professional exegete as all one's dearest prejudices about the connection between Scripture and Christian morality are taken away. Normative teaching? Perhaps not. Ideals? Well, which are you going to choose. The programme of Jesus' life and teaching perhaps? Sounds promising, but will we not end up trimming Jesus and his teaching to suit our current concerns? Paul's letters surely give us direction? Yes, but so many of them, like all the texts of Scripture are intended for particular audiences and come from social and cultural situations which are not ours. And so on.

Instead Deidun recommends a 'non-method' which will be free, unpredictable, versatile and imaginative, 'a relaxed and imaginative

approach to the Bible'. This non-method, which will have subversive as well as constructive functions, proves marvellously productive in Deidun's hands. It serves to highlight the coinherence of 'imperative' and 'indicative' in Christian morality, offers a biblical paradigm for the process of ethical discernment and teaches us something about progressivity in the gaining of moral insight. These are just examples. The first is central, though, to Christian morality. Joseph Ratzinger frequently makes this point, that the particular solutions proposed for ethical questions depend on a 'theological anthropology' that grounds those solutions. Vincent MacNamara considers this kind of issue in his contribution on the distinctiveness of Christian morality.

That leaves three chapters in Part One. I found Joseph Selling's contribution on authority and moral teaching in a Catholic Christian context original but puzzling. Charles Curran writes on absolute moral norms saying that there must be some but reminding us there is much controversy about the question. Thomas R. Kopfensteiner writes on the 'fundamental option'. I believe this term should be given a decent burial. What people are trying to get at in talking about it has always eluded me. When I get a glimpse of their concerns I feel they are adequately—and more satisfactorily—dealt with by speaking in terms of virtue. I would appreciate someone explaining more simply what people feel would be lost if the notion were to be simply dropped.

Part Two deals with applied ethics and here the fields of concern and particular issues are many. It is best to think of Part Two, perhaps, as a series of illustrations showing how Catholic morality approaches issues like justice, property, punishment, war and peace, sexual behaviour, truth and lies, and so on. Patrick Hannon's brief but crystal clear introduction to the question of morality and law is masterly and Kevin Kelly's reflections on problems associated with divorce and remarriage are very helpful. Within the field of medical ethics the selection must, perforce, be even more drastic. The issues dealt with are euthanasia, new reproductive techniques and organ transplantation (this latter a timely reminder, perhaps, that Catholic morality does not oppose all 'interference with nature' as such but on certain principles). The book ends with a short piece on hypnosis and general anaesthesia.

There is a lot in this book then, that will be useful for the student of moral theology. I was wondering, as I read, whether 'Christian ethics' and 'moral theology' indicate precisely the same field of study or whether they don't approach the same material with slightly different formal concerns. Many authors here allude to 'theological anthropology', an understanding of being human which is carried by the Christian tradition, and a chapter specifically addressing that issue might have been good. I also wondered whether the book should have included a sympathetic introduction to the Finnis and Grisez development of natural law theory. But so much is already offered here, and no introduction to such a complex field can claim to be complete.

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