

## BOOK REVIEWS

*The Moral Context of Pastoral Care.* Don S. Browning. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1976. 144 pp. \$7.95.

In this publication Browning is concerned about the present socio-cultural situation in Western culture, which is characterized by pluralism and rapidly changing normative structures. He examines the tremendous impact that pluralism and competing values and worldviews have upon the well-being of persons and concludes that there is a real need in today's society to help persons develop meaningful value systems. He describes the needs of persons in a rapidly changing society in the following quote:

Our present sociocultural situation is one of considerable instability at the level of values. Normative values and value symbols in a society of rapid social change are constantly under enormous strain. The difficulties in developing a stable value context in advanced technological societies has the greatest consequences for individual and corporate well-being. Unless ways are discovered to help individuals and families stabilize their value commitments while values in society are fluid, the rate of emotional illness, identity confusion, and general spiritual malais will increase alarmingly.

Browning believes that pastoral care and counseling have reflected the confusion of values at the wider cultural level; and because of this, it is not in the position to influence the many people who are searching and reaching out for self-control and self-transcendence. He argues that pastoral care and counseling have abandoned moral guidance in a time when there needs to be clarification of normative values in the lives of persons. He points out that the influence of the nondirective methods and the moral objectivism of psychiatry have contributed to pastoral care's abdication of the role of moral guidance. He concludes that educative counseling has dominated modern pastoral care which has emphasized the non-imposition of solutions on persons. He further states that modern pastoral care has sought to focus upon the emotional-dynamic aspects of personal growth to the exclusion of helping persons to reconstruct the normative moral and cultural value symbols by which they live.

Browning offers a solution to the neglect of moral values in pastoral care. His solution focuses upon the reclamation by pastoral care of the socio-ethical context of Pharisaic Judaism which formed the ethos out of which Christianity emerged. The Pharisaic tradition was characterized by a system of practical moral relationality built upon an interpretation and implementation of covenant law. The law provided a system which informed every aspect of everyday life, and the role of the religious functionary was to guide persons within the context of the community of laws.

With this Pharisaic tradition in mind Browning visualizes the function of pastoral care to be the creation of a moral context for inquiry. Realizing that he could be accused of reinstating the doctrine of salvation by works as well as pejorative legalism and moralism, he disclaims this intention and says the task of the church is to create a



climate of moral inquiry so that an ethical milieu can be developed. Rather than focusing upon the imposition of values in moral inquiry, he talks of a dialogue in ethical concerns between the individual members of the church and church's historical inheritance.

The thesis of the book is very fascinating and brings pastoral care and counseling into the context of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Moreover, the book recognizes that value conflicts and value ambivalences are the major causes of problems in living. This is a book that every pastor should have in his/her library, because it brings a fresh view to ministry which has been greatly needed for a long time.

This book has particular relevancy to the black pastor. My own analysis of black pastoral care leads me to believe that black pastors function in similar ways to the religious functionaries of ancient Judaism. The black preacher has been the custodian of the religious values of the black community, and he/she constantly utilized preaching to keep the religious norms before the community. The sources of much of what black pastors have done in pastoral care may be envisaged through examining this book.

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*Bible and Ethics in the Christian Life.* Bruce C. Birch and Larry L. Rasmussen. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Augsburg Publishing House, 1976, 221 pp., \$4.95 (Paperback).

It is significant that the title of this book reads, "Bible and Ethics in the Christian Life" rather than "Ethics and Bible" or "Biblical Ethics in the Christian Life." There appears to be a growing awareness among American writers in Christian social ethics, at least in recent years, that the whole field of biblical studies is a dynamically rich, though neglected area of critical ethical inquiry. This book partially represents, in the reviewer's judgement, a "positive recovery" of the critical importance of the Bible in the day-to-day life of the Christian—especially in terms of its rich normative heritage for practical guidance in a panic-stricken and morally ambivalent world.

With regard to a candid overview of this book, *Bible and Ethics in the Christian Life*, the reviewer has been intellectually stimulated by the disinterested manner in which the authors constructively relate Biblical studies and Christian ethics. The introduction sets the stage for the essential thrust and biblico-ethical discourse of the volume. The purpose of the book is described by the authors, Bruce C. Birch and Larry L. Rasmussen, in the following manner: "It attempts to begin dealing adequately with the biblical material as it relates to ethics." To a certain extent, the struggle to relate meaningfully the Bible and ethics in the Christian life arises from the peculiar vacuum in which



the religious scholar finds himself in a scientifically and technologically complex society where predominant emphasis is placed upon vocational specialization. In terms of the marked divergence of these two particular fields, the "vocational dilemma" or "vacuum" of which the reviewer speaks is disclosed in this observation by the authors: "the generalist has been replaced by the specialist. The result is that only rarely is the ethicist now competent as a biblical scholar or the biblical scholar sophisticated as an ethicist." (p. 12) It would appear that this is one of the many vocational-theoretical burdens with which we must grapple, if we are to address seriously such pertinent questions as: "What kind of authority for Christian morality is the Bible?" "At what points and for what purposes in the Christian moral life might biblical materials have an appropriate and influential role?" "What are the tasks of Christian ethics and at what critical points does Christian ethics draw on biblical materials?" "What role does the church play in the relating of the Bible and Christian ethics?" These are a few of the crucial questions which the writers seek to address in this volume.

For example, Chapter I takes up the matter of the divergence of Bible and ethics and some of the problematics inherent in critically relating biblical studies to ethical theory and practice, particularly over the last decade. There is an apparent gap in both perception and methodology marked by the way in which the biblical scholar and ethicist go about explicating their different disciplines. On the one hand, it appears that the biblical scholar has—in varying degrees—viewed the legitimate task of biblical theology as being essentially descriptive and historical in nature; on the other hand, the ethicist has, apparently, perceived his task more along the lines of analytical reflection upon principles, norms, and values in light of their implications for moral action and involvement. Yet the authors wish to suggest that a *sharp line* between the legitimate task of the Christian ethicist and biblical scholar should not be drawn—though one must acknowledge methodological tension.

Chapters II and III continue the methodological discussion on how to relate constructively the Bible and ethics into a coherent pattern for understanding the Christian life. Here it is noteworthy that Birch and Rasmussen contrast the "ethics of being" (character formation in-process) with the "ethics of doing" (decision-making and action in-process). This may be a helpful distinction—theoretically.

Another interesting episode in this book, *Bible and Ethics in the Christian Life*, is the discussion on the church as a "shaper" of moral character and identity. Here the authors cite three primary functions of the church as a bearer of moral tradition. First, the church as a bearer of moral tradition is concerned with the social, spiritual, and ethical development of persons in community—as they seek to respond to the revolutionary demands of the Christian faith in the world. Secondly, the church as a bearer of moral tradition may serve as a source of content for a viable ethic. Thirdly, the church as a bearer of moral



tradition attempts to create a climate wherein persons can develop greater ethical sensitivity to the importance of accountability in the moral life, not simply to society and community but to God who calls us to a new humanity—liberation and maturity in Jesus Christ.

The last few chapters of this informative work, *Bible and Ethics in the Christian Life*, suggest how biblical materials may be made available, in more practical ways, as an ethical resource for human conduct and church involvement. Critically discerned, the following two points seem appropriate. First, there is only limited treatment, in this reviewer's judgment, of the rich tradition of the "liberation theme" in both the Old and New Testaments, which is of critical ethical significance for many Christians of the Third World community. This is unfortunate. Secondly, one might further observe that while this volume reflects a careful exegesis in terms of content and adequate theological balance of *some* vital issues in ethics and biblical theology, the moral claims of the oppressed today could have, perhaps, been identified more radically as a perennial concern of the whole covenant community. Besides these critical reservations, this book offers the reader an exciting discussion of the value of the Bible as a normative source for the moral life.

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### BOOKS RECEIVED

- Abimbola, Wande. *Ifa Divination Poetry*. New York: NOK Publishers, Ltd., 1977. 170 pp. \$12.50.
- Bacchiocchi, Samuele. *From Sabbath To Sunday*. Rome: The Pontifical Gregorian University Press, 1977. 372 pp. \$6.00. (Purchase from the author at 230 Lisa Lane, Berrier Springs, Michigan 49103)
- Booth, Newell S. *African Religions: A Symposium*. New York: NOK Publications, Ltd., 1977. 390 pp. \$18.50.
- Burrows, Millar. *Jesus in the First Three Gospels*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1977. 304 pp. \$11.95.
- Clinebell, Howard. *Growth Groups*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1977. 176 pp. \$4.95.
- Cox, James W., ed. *The Twentieth-Century Pulpit*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1978. 301 pp. \$8.95.
- Gaba, Christian. *Scriptures of an African People: The Sacred Utterances of the Anlo*. New York: NOK Publishers, Ltd., 1973. 145 pp. \$12.50.
- Green, Michael, ed. *The Truth of God Incarnate*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1977. 144 pp.
- Harmon, Nolan B. *Understanding The United Methodist Church*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1977. 176 pp. \$3.50.
- Jackson, Edgar N. *The Many Faces of Grief*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1977. 174 pp. \$7.95.

- Lescoe, Francis. *Existentialism: With or Without God*. New York: Alba House, 1974. 456 pp. \$6.95.
- Mace, David R. and Vera. *How To Have A Happy Marriage*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1977. 174 pp. \$6.95.
- Mayana, Jose. *A Strategy For Liberation*. New York: Alba House, 1974. 183 pp. \$4.50.
- Schilling, S. Paul. *God and Human Anguish*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1977. 304 pp. \$11.95.



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