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Review of Charles E. Curran, *Toward an American Catholic Moral Theology* (1987)

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AR BOOK REVIEWS

Christianity in the West 1400-1700. By John Bossy. Oxford University Press, 1985. 189 pages. \$18.95.

John Bossy states that although this book does not quite fit the definition of "essay," it is in many ways more an essay than any other genre of historical writing. This is intended to be a study of the Reformation and its impact on Christians of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, yet almost half of the work looks at Christianity in the West just prior to the Reformation.

It is important to note that the title speaks of "Christianity," not church. Much of this intention is to look at the way Christianity was experienced prior to and after the Reformation. Bossy balances the culture and faith of the elite with careful attention to the religion of the masses, but in a way that is as controversial as suggestive: he denies any fundamental distinction between the two, seeing them rather as pieces of the same fabric. Likewise, the author refers to Western Christianity prior to the Reformation as "traditional" Christianity and examines the Reformation as both extension and challenge to traditional religion. In this way, the Reformation is interpreted less as a break or departure from medieval Christianity, and more a lively and creative transition of people and society.

This is not a book to be used as a text for novices, but it would serve well even in a basic course alongside a more comprehensive work.

Richard L. Harrison, Jr.
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Toward An American Catholic Moral Theology. By Charles E. Curran. University of Notre Dame Press, 1987. 209 pages. \$18.95.

In his essay, "Moral Theology in the United States: An Analysis of the Last Twenty Years," Charles Curran notes that "leading moral theologians in the United States before the council were not prepared to deal well with the newer developments in orientation and methodology" (21). Curran adds: "It is fair to say that in general the United States made little or no contribution to the theology of Vatican II except in the area of religious liberty" (22).

This article serves as chapter two of Curran's most recent collection of essays, *Toward An American Catholic Moral Theology*. The point it makes about

American (the adjective employed to refer to the United States) moral theology illustrates two of the purposes of Curran's book. For Curran identifies the accomplishments *and* the lacunae of American Catholic moral theology, noting significant moments of its history but also identifying the constructive work which awaits moral theologians. The organization of the book highlights these purposes: while the first two chapters trace the history of moral theology in general and in the United States, the remaining essays contribute to a contemporary moral theology suited to the American context.

While *Toward An American Catholic Moral Theology* is a diverse collection of essays, one way to characterize the book is to note four tasks which Curran accomplishes, two of which I have mentioned briefly above. First, Curran provides an overview of the history of moral theology. In chapter one, "The Historical Development of Moral Theology," he sets the stage for his discussion of American Catholic moral theology by tracing the growth of moral theology as a distinct discipline in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In particular, he focuses on the development of the literary genre known as the manuals of moral theology. Chapter two analyzes American Catholic moral theology over the past twenty years in the context of the four audiences—ecclesial, societal, ecumenical, and academic—of moral theology in the United States.

There is a second feature of Curran's book: his identification of what is missing from American Catholic moral theology. Curran reminds readers of the work still required for an American Catholic moral theology to be adequate. From this concern arises the "toward" of Curran's title; American Catholic moral theology is developing, but it remains incomplete. As an instance of its limitations, Curran identifies, in chapter four ("Moral Theology in Dialogue with Biomedicine and Bioethics"), a "significant negative effect on Christian ethics in the United States as a result of the development of the discipline of bioethics" (85). Curran asserts that when bioethics first emerged as a discipline, theologians were among the most prominent scholars in the field. But now "many theological ethicists in the area of bioethics have paid less and less attention to the theological aspect of their ethics" (85). Curran attributes this in part to the pluralistic context of American society, in which theological ethicists seek to find common ground with other members of study groups and commissions. While Curran lauds such work, he worries that such an environment has hindered creative *theological* work in the American context.

Another gap is identified in chapter five, "Just Taxation in the Roman Catholic Tradition." Curran argues that while the Roman Catholic tradition has long been committed to justice and to human rights, "very little has been written on a just system of taxation" (93); "one is surprised to see how seldom the issue of tax justice has been addressed" (96). Moreover, in chapter six, "Filial Responsibility for an Elderly Parent," Curran asserts that moral and legal obligations toward the parent are more complicated than their treatment in the current theological literature would suggest.

Finally, Curran calls for additional methodological precision by moral theologians. He acknowledges that much has been accomplished by ethicists in

their analysis of moral norms, but urges the “revisionists” “. . . to develop exactly what is meant by proportionate reason and to study all the ramifications of the theory in all aspects and areas of moral theology” (41).

Bioethics, taxation, the elderly, methodology: all point, for Curran, to the limitations that need to be overcome before there can be a moral theology that is genuinely American as well as authentically Catholic.

A third accomplishment of these essays is the description of Curran’s own constructive theological approach to ethics. His key theological theme is *mediation*; “mediation is distinctive of Catholic theology and is manifested in all aspects of that theology” (34). It is mediation, Curran suggests, which distinguishes Roman Catholic from Protestant ethics; “mediation is often the continuing point of difference between Protestant ethicists of all types and Catholics be they liberal or conservative” (34). By mediation, Curran “means that the gospel, faith, and grace cannot deny or go around the human but are mediated in and through the human” (177). Mediation allows Curran (and Roman Catholic moral theologians) to employ natural law theory, to incorporate knowledge of this world into theology, and to insist that ethicists cannot deny the human. In questions of applied ethics, it allows Curran to state, e.g., that technology does not have to be viewed as the usurpation of God’s authority. Or, he says, it permits the American bishops’ pastoral letter on the economy (which he assesses in chapter eight) to avoid two errors—either complete avoidance of economic questions or absolute certainty about the resolution of complex economic problems. Curran acknowledges that mediation offers possibilities of abuse; such abuse occurs when Catholics “absolutize what is only the mediation” (149).

Central to Curran’s theology of mediation is “One of the most important characteristics of contemporary moral theology” (x), historical consciousness. Historical consciousness recognizes the development in Christian ethics; it emphasizes “the particular, the individual and the changing” (67), but does not ignore the universal. Moral theologians with historical consciousness will recognize both continuity and discontinuity in Christian ethics.

Other theological themes which are significant to Curran are eschatology, ecclesiology, and theological anthropology. His use of these themes is especially evident when he discusses “What Is Distinctive and Unique About Christian Ethics and Christian Morality” in chapter three.

The fourth accomplishment of Curran’s book is his constructive work on certain applied topics. In addition to the essays on taxation, filial responsibility, biomedicine, and the economy, Curran presents a lucid analysis of the relationship between personal morality and public policy (in chapter nine, which examines the case of Agnes Mary Mansour) and a Christian perspective on religious freedom and human rights (in chapter seven).

The essay format of the book prevents any of these theological themes and applied topics from being analyzed in depth. However, it does allow the reader to sample a wide range of topics in contemporary moral theology. Curran’s essays will be of particular interest to professional moral theologians. But they

are also accessible to a general audience because of Curran's clarity of style and organization. Readers will gain an appreciation of the possibilities and the limitations of current Roman Catholic moral theology.

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The Language and Logic of the Bible: The Road to Reformation. By G.R. Evans. Cambridge University Press, 1985. 192 pages. \$32.50.

This book is about the development, during the later Middle Ages, of story understandings of the Bible. Evans describes her work as an attempt to tell a story. This is not a passing modesty or a bit of throw-away rhetoric; it is a serious and useful description. The reader who doesn't take it seriously might find frustration and confusion to be the outcome of a first reading.

Evans has obviously shaped the story she wishes to tell. She has discerned questions begged by the history of theology and church traditions and has pursued answers to those questions. She acknowledges passing over important questions. She has provided a reasonable organization to her material. No historiographer can do otherwise. All the more credit to her, then, when her own presence is so unobtrusive. Evans doesn't overburden her readers with moments of interpretation founded on happy retrospection and her own ecclesiastical/theological predispositions. On the other hand, she hasn't thereby lightened the reader's load. The reader's risk of frustration and confusion resides precisely in Evans' decision not to offer an interpretation. I came to this book looking for theses, demonstrations, conclusions. I found instead a marvelous tale that I nearly overlooked because I assumed from the outset what the author must be up to.

One will search in vain for a sustained argument. Evans is plainly a better historiographer than that. She doesn't formulate hypotheses and marshal evidence accordingly. She doesn't offer a consistent pattern of interpretation with which to hold the book together. She simply "tells the story" as she knows it. She tells it in such a fashion as to draw the reader into this story, and so as to let the reader reach for his or her own understanding of matters. The story is so deftly told that the reader can't resist this reach. Nor can the reader escape enthusiasm for reading other phases of the story. One is well advised, accordingly, to read the book and to happily anticipate her promised work on the Bible in the sixteenth century.

Evans focuses the reader's attention on the state of four related themes during the later Middle Ages: the concept of Scripture, "the literal sense" of the biblical texts, the influence upon hermeneutics of new studies in grammar and logic, and forums for biblical interpretation. With a minimum of summarizing, Evans allows the major actors of the day to speak their parts on these themes. She doesn't press the limits of periodization here. To the contrary, she indirectly discloses for us the oversimplification of a logic of chronology guiding