

*The Development of Moral Theology: Five Strands.* By Charles E. Curran. Washington: Georgetown University, 2013. Pp. ix + 306.

“The child is the father of the man,” wrote Wordsworth; for biography is, in part, genealogy. Our theological disciplines, too, are woven of diverse historical strands—a handing on (*traditio*) illustrated superbly by Curran’s new, comprehensive history of Catholic moral theology. Magisterial in scope, yet lucidly argued, this volume is a crowning work of one of our most distinguished moral theologians. His method, too, is illuminating; rather than proceeding with a simple chronology of figures and events, C. reveals the complex historical continuities and discontinuities, not only of the Catholic tradition but also of the distinctive strands of which it is woven.

The first strand recounts the origins of the discipline in the ecclesial practice of penance or reconciliation, and the subsequent variations worked upon the themes of sin and repentance in the post-Tridentine *Institutiones morales* and later manuals. In the wake of the Tridentine reforms, the juridical nature of penance predominates in the emerging casuistry. Unmoored from both Scripture and ascetical and dogmatic theology, the new discipline of moral theology was marked by a “minimalistic” preoccupation with sin (“what acts were sinful and the degree of sinfulness” [24]) rather than with growth in virtue.

In the second strand, C. offers a succinct yet incisive interpretation of the seminal influence of Thomas Aquinas played out in subsequent “Thomisms”—the 16th-century revival of Cajetan, Vitoria, Suárez and the “imposition of neoscholasticism” in the seminaries by Leo XIII’s *Aeterni patris* (1879). The latter, Third Thomism, however, betrayed little of Aquinas’s irenic dialectics and even less of the primacy he accorded *sacra doctrina*. Aquinas displaced Aristotle as “the Philosopher,” invoked now against his Enlightenment adversaries.

So too the tradition of natural law, itself indebted to Aquinas, remains a “perennial” third strand precisely in its manifold interpretation. C. argues persuasively that “there has never been a monolithic moral system called natural law with an agreed-upon body of ethical content” (128). Distinguished more by method than by specific conclusions, natural law sustains the possibility of inquiry and argument within and across diverse traditions, while remaining itself no less a tradition subject to diverse theological and philosophical interpretations.

In the fourth strand, C. explores the complex factors underlying the historical development of the papal teaching office, emphasizing in particular the Gregorian Reform, post-Tridentine implementation of the conciliar reforms, and the triumph of ultramontaniam in the 19th century. Curiously, the magisterial revival of Thomistic theology belied the Angelic Doctor’s own magisterial theology that is, the *magisterium cathedrae magistralis* exercised by theologians.

C.’s final strand is devoted to the epochal significance of the Second Vatican Council for moral theology. For C., the strand itself is woven of five threads: the council bequeathed us a new “epideictic” genre, characterized by a rhetoric of “cooperation,” “partnership,” and collaboration” (229). Second, succeeding to the “classicist” worldview of neo-Scholasticism, a new historical consciousness was manifest in

*ressourcement*, *aggiornamento*, and a belated recognition of religious liberty. Third, the council upheld the centrality of Scripture as the “soul of theology” (*Dei verbum* no. 24) generally, and of moral theology in particular (*Optatum totius* no. 16). Moreover, an appeal to common morality must be leavened by the distinctively Christian inspiration of moral discernment. Fourth, Pope John XXIII’s embrace of the modern world gainsaid his predecessors’ anti-Modernist defensiveness, inspiring ecumenical and interreligious collaboration. Finally, *Lumen gentium*’s recognition of the universal call to personal holiness underscored the living unity of moral theology, spirituality, and liturgy.

If in unraveling these strands C. touches lightly on emerging developments in the field, it is perhaps because the novel patterns are still being woven. Let me note three. Cultural hermeneutics reveals the multiplicity of influences shaping the discipline today. Asian, African, and Latin American moral theologians join ethnic and racial minority ethicists in reweaving the tradition. The cultural *loci* of moral theology are irreducibly plural, yet the very depth of difference enriches the whole *sensus fidelium*. The African appeal to *Ubuntu*, for instance, joins what Western philosophy rent asunder: dignity and solidarity. In a similar vein, gender influences not only the art but also the artisans. In moral theology of the new millennium, increasingly, the child is mother of the woman! Hierarchical, magisterial teaching can no longer ignore these influences. Finally, the tradition of natural law, or more precisely, methodological commitment to an intrinsic, objective morality, is mediated in novel, postmodern keys—for example, the discourse ethics of Jürgen Habermas and Seyla Benhabib, and the capability theories of Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum.

Such novelty, after all, marks a vital tradition. Far from being an axiomatic, deductive system, moral theology emerges as a complex web of beliefs, practices, and interpretations that each generation must weave anew. Continuities emerge in the warp and woof of tradition (we discern “family resemblances”), but so too differences. Indeed, we cannot grasp one without the other. No one has been a surer guide here than C. He is, as the poet Hopkins says of Duns Scotus, that “rarest veined unraveller.” A generation of moral theologians remains in his debt.

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*Flourishing: Health, Disease, and Bioethics in Theological Perspective.* By Neil Messer. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013. Pp. xvii + 256. \$35.

Messer’s book is ambitious. It aims to understand health, disease, illness, and disability. His approach to these essential dimensions of human life is threefold: dialogical, deconstructive, and constructive.

M. dialogues with philosophers by discussing multiple definitions of health and illness: from the biostatistical theory proposed by Christopher Boorse “in which health is the absence of disease and diseases are states that interfere with species-typical