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## *Moral Absolutes: Catholic Tradition, Current Trends, and the Truth*

*The P re Marquette Lecture in Theology: 1989*

William E. May

*Marquette University Press: Milwaukee, 1989. Cloth, viii & 93 pp.*

The work of William May is well known to the readers of this quarterly. May has served on the editorial board of *Linacre Quarterly* and as book review editor, and has published frequently in these pages. He is professor of Moral Theology at Catholic University and serves on the International Theological Commission, one of the first two laymen to hold this distinguished appointment. *Moral Absolutes* is the text of the P re Marquette Lecture in Theology for 1989; this series, sponsored by the Theology Department of Marquette University, includes a number of important contributions to theology by the most prominent American theologians. May's lecture will surely prove to be a worthy addition to this prestigious series.

This little book provides an excellent introduction to the current debate about moral absolutes by one who is himself an important participant in the debate. The book is clearly organized: May begins with a brief introduction, in which he defines the idea of a moral absolute. Moral absolutes are a special kind of moral norm, namely, a kind of norm which makes reference to a kind of human action defined in non-moral terms, like "intentionally killing the innocent," and directs that all actions of that kind should not be done. So moral norms are distinct from general moral principles, such as "love God and your neighbor" and from those moral norms which refer to actions which are already specified as immoral, like "wrongful killing." And moral norms are exceptionless; they cannot be overridden by considerations which emerge when one considers further circumstances of actions. "One ought to keep one's promises" is not a moral absolute because a consideration of the circumstances of some particular case of keeping a promise can reveal that one should not keep that promise at that time, but "One should not intentionally kill an innocent person" is a moral absolute because, according to the Catholic tradition, once one recognizes that an act is an act of this kind, no further information about the act will provide a ground for overriding the norm. Many today deny that any moral absolute, thus defined, is true. May thinks otherwise, and this conflict is the focus of his lecture.

In the first major part of the lecture, May discusses the place moral absolutes have held within the Catholic tradition from the Patristic period to the present. He makes clear that, even when moral absolutes were not the explicit subject of theological analysis, they were routinely affirmed by the Church's teaching and by the great theologians of all eras. The idea that moral absolutes were a late medieval invention and not affirmed by St. Thomas is effectively exploded.

In the second major section of the lecture, May lays out the case against moral absolutes. It is made up of four distinct lines of argument: that moral absolutes are incompatible with the historicity of human existence; that the basic moral principle, "Choose the greater good," excludes moral absolutes; that the concrete totality of any action is ignored by moral absolutes (which necessarily refer to *kinds* of actions); and that the best of the Catholic tradition does not endorse moral absolutes.

May then goes on to criticize each of these arguments in turn. These criticisms are too developed for easy summary, but they are more accessible than many of the arguments in this complex and tangled dispute. May's case against revisionist moral theology and, in particular, against the theory of proportionalism, though surely not the last word, is impressive and must be taken seriously. One noteworthy feature of the argument in this

part is that it reveals that the opposition to revisionist theology is not ignorant conservatism, but a serious and developed body of scholarly literature.

May finishes with an interesting argument in favor of the truth of moral absolutes. He maintains that in making free choices, we do not simply choose to cause a transient bit of behavior. In choosing to do something, we determine our moral selves — we give a character and shape to our moral personalities which endure until a contrary choice is made. Moral life is not so much a matter of producing good outcomes as constituting selves that are open to all that is really good. Moral absolutes provide essential guidelines for choices which have this openness. For if one violates moral absolutes, one rejects some part of what is good for human beings. Thus, one who chooses to kill an innocent person for whatever reason sets his or her heart against the good of life; one who chooses to do one of the sexual acts which the Church has rejected by one of the moral absolutes taught in the area of sexual morality sets aside the real goods of sexuality in favor of momentary satisfaction or a pale imitation of the real human goods at stake.

This raises a question: why do moral absolutes, as distinct from other moral principles and norms, have a *special* role in preserving openness to all the goods of human beings? It seems that one who violates a moral norm, even one that is nonabsolute, rejects something of what is good for people. One who breaks his word when the circumstances do not justify it, constitutes himself as a promise breaker, as one who cares less than one should about the bonds of trust between persons and about the other goods which trustworthy cooperation makes possible.

May's conviction that moral absolutes are especially important in preserving openness to the human good is surely right, but he needs a fuller account of why. Is it because they are clearer, or because they function differently in the moral reasoning of one who cares about them? For moral absolutes do seem to function differently than other norms: once one sees that an action is excluded by a moral absolute, one knows that further consideration of the action is simply out of the question. Knowing more about the action and its circumstances is not going to change the fact that that action is of a kind which is simply wrong. Or is there perhaps something much more profound here? I hope that May, and others within the Church, will pursue this matter further.

Still, if May's little book has not said everything which might be said on the difficult matter of moral absolutes, it is a real contribution to the discussion, and should prove helpful not only to professional moralists but to all who want to intelligently find their way through the complex arguments of contemporary moral theology. These debates are in many ways unfortunate, but, as May's book makes clear, they have forced us to think more deeply and more clearly than ever before about the most fundamental and enduring issues of Christian moral life.

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## ***Surviving Death: A Practical Guide to Caring for the Dying and Bereaved***

by Charles Meyer

*Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publication, 1988. 136pp., paper, \$7.95*

The subtitle of this small book indicates its purpose and essential content. Its primary audience is caregivers, and among them, clergy and others who might be expected to have a long-term relationship with those who are bereaved. But the book is simply and attractively written, and the author plainly means to be of help to the bereaved themselves as well as to their families and friends. The author is an Anglican priest who has extensive experience as a hospital chaplain. The perspective of the book is determined by this experience: it is