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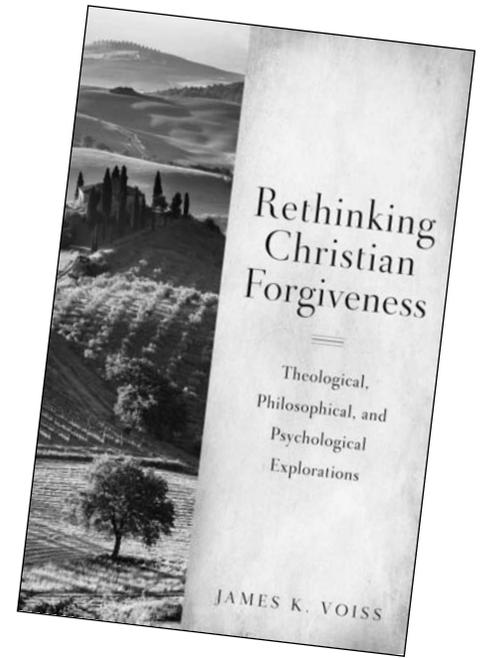
Book Review

Christian Forgiveness As Distinctive – A Convincing Case

Rethinking Christian Forgiveness: Theological, Philosophical, and Psychological Explorations, by James K. Voiss, S.J.

Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2015. xx + 428 pages

Reviewed by Peter Ely, S.J.



This study by James Voiss presents a well constructed, carefully argued, and convincing case for the distinctiveness of Christian forgiveness. Beginning with the question of whether there is such a thing as forgiveness, Fr. Voiss sets out various non-religious accounts of forgiveness from philosophical and psychological sources, identifies “fault-lines” in each, then develops his own account of forgiveness as a “human enactment.” He then moves, in the last part of the book, to his treatment of forgiveness within the context of the Christian narrative. The strength of the book lies in the careful analysis of what the author calls the “landscape” of forgiveness.

Fr. Voiss makes clear that this is an exploration into a complex subject, and his study makes clear how complex it is. He wisely avoids trying to define forgiveness, having found others’ attempts to do so largely unsatisfying. The basic questions that arise in various approaches to

forgiveness serve to tie together the successive chapters of the book. Fr. Voiss observes that, contrary to what one would expect, the areas of divergence among recent philosophers, psychologists, and others outweigh the areas of agreement. Most argue that forgiveness is always a response to moral harm, not injuries from nature. Beyond this narrow convergence one finds the differences. Some argue that forgiveness is possible only after repentance; others say repentance is not necessary. Some argue that forgiveness entails reconciliation, others keep the two separate. Some argue that forgiveness is a conditional response; once the conditions are fulfilled, forgiveness must be given. Some even deny the possibility of forgiveness.

The authors chosen from the “French Continental Landscape” and the Anglo-Americans provide a helpful backdrop for Fr. Voiss’s distinctive description of Christian forgiveness. French continental philosophers stake out a position that brings into question

the very possibility of forgiveness in Derrida and moves toward a “difficult forgiveness” in Ricoeur. The Anglo-Americans concede the possibility of forgiveness and turn to a consideration of its conditions.

In his treatment of psychological approaches Fr. Voiss concentrates not on particular authors but on basic themes. Under the heading “Dynamics of Forgiveness,” he explores the psychologists’ “considerable agreement” in approaching “the things that take place when one is forgiving” (81). If Derrida’s thesis of the impossibility of forgiveness is hard to grasp, even harder to accept, the four areas discussed under the dynamics of forgiveness bring readers

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into areas they can relate to and explore in their own experience.

The review of authors and theories in Part One is followed by the “Excavations” of Part Two, a critique of positions described and a preparation of the ground on which Part Three will build. Fr. Voiss moves to what he calls “a more phenomenologically governed excavation of the experience of forgiveness” (145). The underlying question is what people are doing when they undertake to forgive. Central to Part Two and to the whole work is the author’s analysis of how the self is constituted and the role of meaning in constructing a sense of self. Injury attacks the structure of meaning through which each one constructs his or her sense of self. Fr. Voiss gives a helpful example from his own experience of reinterpreting his sense of self after the turbulent divorce of his parents when he was a young boy.

Only in Part Three, after considering forgiveness as “a human enactment” (Chapter 6), does Fr. Voiss begin to consider forgiveness in a religious context. As he did in the consideration of philosophical positions, he chooses authors with whom to dialogue as he develops his own position. His conclusions can be sketched simply. Forgiveness is Christian when it takes place in the context of the Gospel narrative. Christian forgiveness resolves the questions raised earlier based on the pattern of God’s forgiveness in Christ. It does not require prior repentance. Forgiveness, in fact, makes repentance possible. It is freely given – no repayment expected. It is unconditional. It is sacramental, that is, mediated by our engagement with the world around us (363). Finally, Christian forgiveness comes after conversion and a long period of personal development. We grow into it.

Fr. Voiss has produced an impressive work. It demands a committed reader. Some familiarity with the terrain helps too. Readers who persevere will find themselves well rewarded for the effort. ■

A Call to Create a Culture of Ethics in Colleges and Universities

University Ethics: How Colleges Can Build and Benefit from a Culture of Ethics,

By James F. Keenan, S.J.

Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015 281 pages

Reviewed by Kate Ward

Educators view their colleges and universities as communities of learning, with their own unique strengths, priorities, and cultural practices. But James F. Keenan, a theological ethicist and Canisius Professor at Boston College, argues in a new book that colleges and universities lack one fundamental requirement of a true community: a culture of ethics.

In *University Ethics: How Colleges Can Build and Benefit from a Culture of Ethics*, Fr. Keenan finds that while universities instruct future doctors, lawyers, and journalists in the ethical practice of each profession, faculty and other shapers of university culture do not “practice what they teach.” The university’s fragmented governance structure, with its silos or fiefdoms,

hampers the creation of a university-wide culture of ethics. Fr. Keenan points out that almost by design faculty know nothing about their students’ lives outside the classroom, just as other staff do not know students’ academic experience. Even among the faculty, ethical understandings and practices can differ wildly from department to department.

The book centers on several case studies drawn from news reports and from scholarly research into issues affecting higher education, in the surprisingly rare cases where such research exists. The cases include labor justice for adjunct faculty; aca-

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