

8-1-1980

[Book Review of] *Transition and Tradition in Moral Theology* by Charles E. Curran

Vincent J. Genovesi

Follow this and additional works at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/lnq>

 Part of the [Ethics and Political Philosophy Commons](#), and the [Medicine and Health Sciences Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Genovesi, Vincent J. (1980) "[Book Review of] *Transition and Tradition in Moral Theology* by Charles E. Curran," *The Linacre Quarterly*: Vol. 47: No. 3, Article 14.

Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/lnq/vol47/iss3/14>

Transition and Tradition in Moral Theology

Charles E. Curran

University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, Ind. 46556, 1979. xiv + 290 pp., \$11.95.

Of the nine chapters of this book, seven have been previously published in various journals or edited works. Curran gathers the chapters into three groups which make up the three sections of the book: General Moral Theology, Social Ethics and Medical Ethics. He is at his best in the first and third sections of the book. In the first chapter, he characterizes the changes that have occurred in moral theology. Among other things, Curran notes that moral theology has become more conscious of its close relationships to scripture and spiritual theology. In general, says Curran, Catholic moral theology uses the principle of mediation which means that in order to discover what God is asking of us, we appeal not directly to God's will or reason or word, but rather to "human nature and human reason," by means of which we uncover the natural order as established by God. Thus ethical wisdom is found, not only in scripture but also in the natural law, and not only in faith, but also in reason. Ultimately, of course, faith and reason cannot contradict one another. Curran suggests that there is a link between our confidence in human reason and the changes in moral theology in this sense: that change reflects our search to find out how to respond "to God's gift in Jesus Christ in the light of the scriptures, the historical tradition and the signs of the times" (p. 13). The contemporary developments in moral theology may, in time, prove to be invalid, but acceptance of the principle of mediation and the emphasis on both faith and reason, scripture and tradition, explain why we should not see change as alien to Catholic theological reflection.

In chapter two, Curran uses the theological reaction to *Humanae Vitae* to focus attention on two issues: the methodology used in moral theology, and the teaching function of the church in moral questions. With respect to methodology, the author questions the validity of physicalism, the tendency to identify "the human moral act with the physical structure of the act" (p. 32). He expects that in the future there will be less emphasis on absolute norms wherever the prohibited action is described in terms of the physical structure of the act, but "absolute norms might be required because of the need to protect important societal values and goals such as marriage and the family" (p. 42, 43). Thus Curran calls for an absolute norm against adultery. Regarding the Church's teaching function in areas of morality, Curran refuses to say either that contraception violates an ideal or that it always involves pre-moral, physical or ontic evil; the reason for his stand is that he sees these views as giving so much importance to the physical aspect of sex as to make this aspect normative. He insists that we must face the radical question of the existence of papal error on this teaching and the possibility of dissent in theory and practice (p. 47). In justifying the possibility of dissent, Curran cites two factors: 1) specific moral teachings are not that intimately connected with faith; and 2) particular moral questions by their nature involve a great degree of specificity.

In the chapter on "Moral Theology, Psychiatry and Homosexuality," Curran indicates that although dangers and tensions clearly exist, the relationship between theology and psychiatry is basically one of dialogue and complementarity, which is to be expected in light of Roman Catholicism's basic openness to reason and the human and to whatever reason can tell us about the human." In our understanding of the meaning of humanity, "we come to discover what it is God wants us to do and to be" (pp. 64, 65). After telling us that in attempting to evaluate the morality of homosexuality we should look to the data of psychiatry,

scripture, tradition, the magisterium and human ethical reasoning, Curran adopts the following position: when homosexual acts are engaged in by the irreversible or constitutional homosexual "in the context of a loving union tending to permanency," these actions are objectively good; at the same time, however, "the ideal and normative human meaning of sexuality are in terms of male and female" (p. 72). Curran sees two practical corollaries as deriving from this normative meaning of sexuality: 1) the young should not be taught that sexuality is neutral; and 2) for the struggling adolescent the goal should be toward heterosexuality. Nonetheless, Curran does not think that all homosexuals are called to celibacy or sublimation and in fact, under the conditions prescribed above, he argues that homosexual acts are objectively good because *agere sequitur esse* — morality follows from our being. Since homosexuals have a "different psychic structure and a different sexual humanity," their actions should correspond to this different being (p. 73).

I found the second part of the book, that dealing with Social Ethics, to be less illuminating. In the first two chapters of this section which review the history of American Catholic Social Ethics (1880-1965) and outline a future agenda for the Church in social ethics, Curran's scope is too comprehensive, his aim too ambitious. The result is a barrage of details which do not succeed in communicating a good sense of the overall picture. In his treatment of "Health Care and Distributive Justice," however, Curran argues well that in light of the dignity and fundamental need of the person, everyone "has a right to that basic level of health care which is necessary for decent human living" (p. 153). Curran is quick to point out, of course, both that the right to health care is not the right to health, and that there are many factors more important than medical care which affect health care, viz., food, environment, shelter, education and personal habits or lifestyle. Curran argues for some kind of national health insurance to be paid for by a progressive tax. Granting that there would also have to be some cost-sharing by those receiving care, he suggests that this sharing should likewise be related to income; thus proportional, not arithmetical, equality is advocated. Since personal responsibility plays a role in health maintenance, Curran addresses the argument that those who risk their health, e.g., by smoking or by excessive drinking, should pay more. He rejects the argument because he sees that there are too many variables for a fair system of payments to be worked out. For example, should those who do not exercise, eat properly or get sufficient sleep also pay more?

In the final section of the book, Curran offers an overview of Roman Catholic medical ethics as well as some reflections on the ethical, legal and public funding aspects of abortion. He explains the long and well-defined tradition of Roman Catholic involvement in medical ethics as an expression both of the Church's recognition that faith must be shown in works, and of her standing interest in the various duties of one's state in life. The chapter in medical ethics is quite informative, but bears the marks of an encyclopedic article, which it is, having been prepared for the *Encyclopedia of Bioethics*. It attempts much in terms of historical development and in coverage of specific issues, questions and principles, but it pays a price in not always making clear what is the present state of the question. Thus, in speaking of organ transplants, Curran refers to Pius XII's rejection of the principle of totality as justification for such procedures but he does not indicate what Rome's thinking on the matter is today.

On the issue of abortion, Curran professes a basic pro-life stance; he nonetheless acknowledges that he would judge abortion to be morally acceptable in more instances than the Roman Catholic Church does on the basis of her distinction between direct and indirect abortions. For Curran, "abortion can be justified for preserving the life of the mother and for other important values commensurate with life even though the action aims at abortion as a means to an end" (p. 222). Although he sees the unborn as a true human being, at least within two to three

weeks after conception, Curran opposes any attempt to pass a constitutional amendment to overcome the 1973 Supreme Court decision. Concerning the public funding of abortion, Curran suggests that just as pro-life groups, hoping to curtail abortions, should assure pregnant women the "medical, psychological, economic and social care necessary to bring the child to term and care for the child," so also pro-choice groups could organize to raise necessary funds for elective abortions (p. 247). The author proclaims his sympathy with those who object to having their tax monies used to finance abortion, but he finally reluctantly approves of public funding for elective abortions for the poor because he believes "in respecting as much as possible the existing pluralisms in our society" (p. 247).

There is much here to ponder or to applaud; but there is also much to question. One would like to have Curran by one's side while reading the book so that he might be periodically prodded to greater precision. Not every stance Curran takes is solidly or validly rooted in the past; on occasion one sees more transition than tradition in his thinking. All things considered, however, he is often most helpful in creating a living tradition, a modification of Catholic tradition "in light of contemporary realities and the eschatological pull of the future" (p. xiv).

— Vincent J. Genovesi, S.J., Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Christian Ethics
St. Joseph's University

Aborting America

Bernard Nathanson, M.D. with Richard N. Ostling

Doubleday & Co., Inc., 501 Franklin Ave., Garden City, N.Y. 11530, 1979. x + 320 pp., \$10.00 (hardcover).

This is probably the most important book published on the abortion issue since the infamous Supreme Court decision of Jan. 22, 1973. Its importance goes beyond the *apologia* of a man of science, although Nathanson finds all of the cliché pro-abortion arguments to be unsupportable by scientific evidence or close personal experience with the act of abortion. The book is equally important because it gives us insights into tactics and strategies of the early political movement to achieve the legalization of abortion in the United States. The book is, therefore, like a combination of *The God That Failed* and *The Penkovsky Papers*. It tells us something of both the author himself who has seen the light and his former allies who still hide the light under a bushel.

There is little doubt that Dr. Bernard Nathanson has had more personal experience with abortion than almost any other physician in America. If he were merely an abortionist, however, the importance of his defection would be less momentous. He was, in fact, much more than a busy abortionist. He was the only physician among a small handful of social reformers who founded and subsequently operated the enormously successful National Association for the Repeal