

ETHICS AND ECONOMICS

Religious Perspectives on Business Ethics: An Anthology **Thomas O'Brien and Scott Paeth (Editors)**

Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007 (359 pages)

This book is the first in a new Religion and Business Ethics Series, whose editors, both of DePaul University, are also the editors of this book. Claiming that instructional resources that deal well with the relationship of religion to business ethics are hard to find, O'Brien and Paeth seek to rectify the situation by providing this collection of recently published articles to be used as a supplemental text by those teaching undergraduate business ethics courses. The second editor also authors two introductory chapters. One is a brief review of ethical theory from a philosophical point of view and the other introduces the notion of religious ethics. These are followed by eighteen articles separated into three sections. The editors introduce each piece with well-written synopsis, communicating both the essence of the article and the rationale for its inclusion. Following each article are questions for discussion, which would help students summarize the main ideas of the reading but would not demand that they engage in thinking critically about the material. One omission is that the original publication information of the articles is not provided.

This is a very good reader in the field of business ethics. I would recommend it to anyone teaching the subject, particularly those just beginning their instructional careers in this area. At the same time, a weakness of the text is that the editors do not stay focused on their aim of providing articles dealing with business ethics from a religious perspective.

To the first point, the table of contents reads as a veritable who's who in the field of business ethics. Many leading scholars—Camenisch, Duska, Solomon, Goodpaster, Nash, and McCann—are there, and the contributions chosen are these thinkers at their

reflective best. Of even greater value, because this is designed to be a text used alongside a secular business ethics textbook, is when the editors move from business ethics journals to theological journals. One article deserving of highlight is, “Global Capitalism: The New Context of Christian Social Ethics,” by M. D. Litonjua, which originally appeared in *Theology Today*. Litonjua’s analysis of global capitalism, using the preferential option of the poor as a hermeneutical tool, presents a perspective on political economy simply not found in the standard textbooks. A second article, “The Spirit of Place: The Columbia River Watershed Letter and the Meaning of Community,” by Douglas Burton-Christie, from the journal *Horizons*, is a brilliant examination of an International Pastoral Letter written by the Catholic bishops of the Pacific Northwest. Used in the classroom, it would almost certainly get students to consider their moral and spiritual relationship to the earth, something the standard texts do not even attempt to do.

Despite the fact that there is much to recommend in this anthology, the editors do move away from their mission. Fully one half of the articles approach the question of business ethics from a purely philosophical stance. For example, in a finely argued paper titled “Business Ethics: Oxymoron or Good Business?,” Ronald Duska insists that if ethics is to be a reality in the commercial sector, the purpose of business needs to be reenvisioned. This argument, however, was already made twenty-five years ago by Paul Camenisch in the journal *Business and Professional Ethics*. The business ethics text I use contains this article, so the supplemental value of O’Brien’s and Paeth’s reader is minimal. According to both Duska and Camenisch, business is to contribute to human flourishing. What Camenisch rightly notes is that a philosophical or theological anthropology will have to be developed to define human fulfillment. The anthology could have used the space taken up in repeating old arguments to advance something substantial on this front.

The editors go further than just ignoring the religious aspect of business ethics by including articles that are hostile to religion, the very phenomenon they bemoan concerning the current state of our texts. For instance, the inclusion of the article, “Smith, Friedman and Self-Interest in Ethical Society,” by Harvey S. James Jr. and Farhad Rassekh, will leave the religious studies professor with the extra burden of explaining how Friedman’s religion of positivism is at odds with theistic religion.

This series itself is an exciting happening. I agree with Paeth’s point in his introduction that religion shapes the whole of a believer’s life. Faith cannot be compartmentalized. How one’s ultimate religious convictions ought to affect the practice of business is a matter of central importance. I look forward to seeing how future volumes address this question.

—Jim Wishloff

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