

Religious Perspectives on Business Ethics—An Anthology

Thomas O'Brien and Scott Paeth, eds. 2006. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield. ISBN: 978-0-7425-5011-7, \$36.95 (paper).

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The editors of this anthology state that this book “has its genesis in the struggle of professors at DePaul University to find suitable textbooks that bridge the divide between the fields of religious studies and business ethics.” It will be instructive for those interested in this anthology to be aware of the origin of this project. The struggle that O'Brien and Paeth compiled this anthology to address is that of teaching undergraduate business ethics courses within the religious studies department of a Catholic institution of higher education. The solution that this anthology has been crafted to address has been tested, and found largely to fit the needs of institutions like DePaul University. As such, this text will likely be deemed appropriate for others insofar as their struggles resemble the struggles of these professors in this context.

This volume is “the first in a series on the topic of business ethics from a religious perspective,” and is partially justified by the growth and influence of the field of business ethics. Since the early 1970's, business ethics has emerged as a scholarly field in its own right. The rapid growth of this field has been fueled by corporate scandals, a seemingly expanded array of competing interests affecting or affected by business, and the rising societal expectations placed upon business institutions in recent years. Prominent textbooks written to meet the needs of this new field have done so by highlighting these various issues and illustrating them using contemporary business case studies. The authors are motivated to supplement what they see as lacking in these texts.

The authors describe three distinct fields which converge in the standard business ethics classroom: business ethics, philosophy, and religion. Added to this challenge is their assessment that the average undergraduate student has limited understanding or experience in any of these fields, requiring instructors to rush through an excessive amount of information. As a former professor of business ethics for undergraduate students, I feel the editors of this volume have accurately described the multi-disciplinary challenge of teaching business ethics.

The authors of prominent business ethics texts often concede this multi-disciplinary challenge by focusing extensively on one of these fields: the applied realm of business ethics. The perceived wisdom has it that the cardinal sin in teaching business ethics is to provide theoretical

abstractions shorn of practical application and the authors of these texts know that the safest way to avoid this pitfall is to avoid dwelling on abstract philosophical matters and the controversy of religious views. As such, the prominent moral philosophies, theologies and philosophers are typically introduced briefly (if at all) in these texts before proceeding to a primary focus on the diverse array of business issues and applied ethics cases. As with O'Brien and Paeth, for years I found it necessary to supplement the content of these texts in order to provide the philosophical and religious perspectives they largely omit. Unlike O'Brien and Paeth, the vast majority of the complementary readings that I have introduced are in the field of moral philosophy. Partially, this is because the non-denominational liberal arts Christian college where I taught intends that such a course place an emphasis on philosophical perspectives. Still, these editors have put their finger on a real and pressing challenge facing business ethics teaching.

It seems to me that an excellent anthology is meant to do one or more of the following: offer a broad collection of diverse perspectives on a topic; provide a survey of quality, seminal work on a topic that will efficiently introduce the uninitiated; or offer common writing on a specific theme that extends the general topic in a particular direction. The authors make it clear this last objective is their chief concern, as they explicitly attempt to extend our understanding of the general field of business ethics in order to accommodate a religious dimension. As such, they assume the readers of this volume have pre-existing resources for understanding these three fields and are thus equipped to extend their foundational knowledge.

O'Brien and Paeth acknowledge the difficulty of using such a lens for viewing a business context that is commonly deemed secular. They also note that it is difficult to find business ethics scholarship written from a religious perspective. Still, I believe the authors underestimated (or ignored) some inherent challenges to their project. There are so many different (and oft-conflicting) religious perspectives; how could any one anthology adequately capture the chief claims of each? In a field that demands practical guidance, how could an anthology demonstrate the applicability or importance of religious tenets? This project seems to have resolved the first of these questions by focusing primarily on the Catholic Christian perspective, and the second question seems largely resolved by assuming their readers are already convinced of the relevance of their faith and will largely discern for themselves the best way to operationalize personal beliefs. I am not certain they have chosen the best basis on which to proceed.

The eighteen chapters (scholarly articles) featured in this anthology are divided into three distinct parts, each one meant to address one of

the three fields described above. Most of the first group of chapters offer views from various camps of normative philosophy (from Kantian deontology to Aristotelian virtue) written by business ethics scholars sympathetic to the relevance of a religious dimension. The second group of chapters is an eclectic bunch that seems intent on defending the value of Christian marketplace activity and introducing the conceptual strength of Confucianism, Zen Buddhism, or a particular philosopher (Alasdair MacIntyre). The third group of chapters features a number of the common issues found in business ethics textbooks (e.g., sweatshops; environmentalism) as seen through the lens of various Christian and Catholic traditions (except one article which employs Judaism) and concepts the authors deem largely compatible with these traditions (e.g., covenant, community, accountability). The authors ambitiously set out to create an anthology that would help professors teach a business ethics course from a religious perspective. The difficulty of their task is revealed in that only about a third of the articles in their collection begin from such a perspective; the majority make their point by beginning with secular concepts and philosophies that admit some kinship with those featured in Christian traditions.

To the extent that efficient navigation is a primary virtue of any anthology, the authors have done a wonderful job. Perhaps one of my favorite features of this anthology is a brief article written by the authors titled "Using this Book in a Classroom Setting." In it, professors like myself are provided two tables that can helpfully facilitate navigating this 348-page volume for particular criteria including issue, idea, author, and chapter title. Paeth has also written some introductory material in order to help contextualize the discussion of business ethics and the place of religion in relation to it. Here the authors' bias toward Roman Catholicism is apparent in claims such as "perhaps the most influential statement on the relationship of religion to business ethics in the past twenty-five years has been the U.S. Catholic bishops pastoral letter, *Economic Justice for All*" (p. 26), an affirmation some Christians would challenge as parochial on theological and geographical terms. Still, this bias is less obvious in the selected chapters of this anthology than in the words of its editors. One of the chief contributions which the authors make to every article is in the form of an introductory abstract at the beginning and helpful discussion questions at the end. Since the average business ethics instructor is not likely to utilize all of the articles featured in this volume, these navigational and pedagogical aids should help instructors immensely in finding the most relevant material.

Unfortunately, I feel this work could have been improved in some

significant ways. This is partially explained by the first two of my stated criteria for an excellent anthology: the first regarding breadth and the second regarding the quality of the articles featured. There is already a fairly recent anthology, *On Moral Business* (Stackhouse, McCann, Roels, & Williams, 1995), available for professors seeking to apply faith to the ethics of the marketplace. *On Moral Business* has a bias toward a broad view of Christianity, yet thankfully the reader is informed explicitly of this on the cover. More importantly, *On Moral Business* offers breadth in the form of a wide range of philosophical and religious perspectives. It also goes quite a bit further in providing the reader with quality in the form of collected articles, many of which are seminal position papers that have stood the test of time. For most undergraduate professors seeking to infuse business ethics with a spiritual dimension, it seems this larger anthology will remain the standard.

In the type of anthology attempted here, I believe editorial bias should be either accepted or minimized, and more could be done toward the relevant application of material. If this is truly the first volume in a series, I believe O'Brien and Paeth should have positioned this as an anthology for the Catholic tradition they know best, and thus proceeded to more adequately serve the significant number of Catholic institutions that have for over thirty years been on the forefront of the emerging field of business ethics. Unfortunately, it is all too easy to perceive this volume as making a case for Catholic social ideas while proposing to do something much grander: adding a religious dimension to the study of business ethics. Subsequent volumes could attempt to do justice to other religious traditions (though less documented and accessible at present), written by their own adherents. There may well be scope at the end of such a series to provide a compelling anthology of seminal works from a diverse array of religious perspectives. An anthology on the rich frameworks of moral philosophy should also be compiled, and this may even provide the intellectual (yet secular) link for admitting a spiritual dimension in business. Finally, case studies and related writing could be another tool that these editors, and this series, could provide if they truly wanted to help professors bridge the gap between theory and practice, and theology and action.

Having taught business ethics at a Christian liberal arts institution, I can readily attest to the struggle these editors have described, and the need to ensure that spiritual or religious dimensions are represented in the discussion of business morality. As such, I believe there are valuable resources in this anthology I may use in future classes. However, I feel that in the present volume, too much breadth was sacrificed for the sake of

the editors' particular context and tradition, too few of the best available articles are represented, and too little was done to aid professors in making theology as practical as business. O'Brien and Paeth successfully highlight the challenge of teaching business ethics courses, but many of us will continue to find it necessary to address these challenges with different form and content than that provided here.

References

Stackhouse, M., McCann, D., Roels, S., & Williams, P. (Eds.). (1995). *On moral business: Classical and contemporary resources for ethics in economic life*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans. ■