On Moral Business: Classical and Contemporary Resources for Ethics in Economic Life
Max L. Stackhouse, Dennis P. McCann, Shirley J. Roels, eds., with Preston N. Williams
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On Moral Business (OMB) is an anthology with a mission. Is its mission directed at a plausible objective? If so, is the content of sufficient “quality”—diversity, focus, persuasion, and depth—to advance the mission? (Its quantity is not in question. It has 961 pages of text incorporating over 500,000 words.) If not, is the anthology important for other reasons? These matters are the focus of the review.

The mission is the creation of “a ‘public theology’ [that generates] a way of speaking about the reality of God and God’s will for the world that is intellectually valid in the marketplace of ideas and morally effective in the marketplace of goods and services” (p. 951). This is to be done in an effort to create an intellectually satisfying geoeconomic ethic by those who “hold to a ‘preferential option for the poor’ [and] must now embrace capitalism” in one of its several forms, after having been forced since the late 1980s to abandon their hope in a socialistic model. Many of those dislodged from socialism are not able to embrace a libertarian neoconservative model that does not include a “preferential option for the poor” (p. 950).

Another goal of OMB “is to seek ethical guidelines for the emerging forms of economic life beyond traditionalism [found in Third World countries] and socialism by studying the most profound resources we can find from the past, from around the world, and from current practices that bear on the future” (p. 10). The editors believe that multinational corporations and their managers will become both the repositories and conveyors of social/economic justice in the future. They are expected to be the emerging and surviving force. The religious institutions lost their place of dominance long ago and the political entities are no longer able to confine, repel, or shape the values of tomorrow. By both their position and clout, the multinational corporations are seen as holding the keys to the future regarding

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economic justice and moral practices. The world view outlined above drives and guides the anthology.

The editors would like to see five groups take OMB to heart and participate in the development of a “public theology” that would fairly serve all humanity in the years ahead in this ever shrinking and pluralistic world. The editors want to recruit:

1. Seminary and divinity school students;
2. Undergraduate and graduate students in the secular business schools;
3. Students going into business who are being trained in the Christian colleges;
4. Academic professionals (the editors’ peers); and
5. Business professionals who are, or are willing, to interact with practicing clergy.

To facilitate the mission outlined above they assembled selected materials from a number of “classical resources”—Hebrew Scriptures; New Testament; ancient philosophers; Catholic theological traditions; and some reformational traditions. They then moved on to the “modern debates” by selecting materials from—enlightenment theories; religious forces giving rise to modernity; works bearing on socialism, capitalism and Christianity; and economic views drawn from the works of Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Chinese philosophy, African traditions, and recent church pronouncements. The closing section addresses “contemporary developments” and offers a variety of materials drawn from—theories about what might be done to redirect corporate culture and behavior; readings focused on ethics in marketing, finance, accounting, and human resources; pieces on moral business leadership; the global economy with a specific focus on multinational corporations; the challenges raised by emerging global markets; the economic development of the Third World; and the impact of growing economies on the global environment.

It is fair to say that the selected essays (233 of them, including the editors’ introductions) were chosen (95%+) and positioned to support overwhelmingly the thesis that there ought to be a “preferential option for the poor,” and that this perspective can and ought to be fostered by the future repositories of this world’s socio-economic morals and values—the multinational corporations. This being the editors’ position, those sharing it are called on to join the conversation and help build a “public theology” that will foster social and economic justice in a way that pro-mulgates this particular world and life view.

In sum, the mission of OMB, in its most inclusive sense, has four parts: (1) to create a “public theology” that will help (2) develop ethically sensitive executives and middle managers throughout the very large multinational corporations so that (3) social/economic justice may be advanced for everyone (4) in the context of an ethic which pays special attention to the provision of a “preferential option for the poor.”

Three comments are in order. First, OMB is a wonderful source of information and ideas for both those disposed to an egalitarian or a libertarian world view in matters of social/economic justice. All Christian “world views” can surely agree that segments (2) and (3) of the anthology’s mission are acceptable in a broad or general sense.

Second, skeptics who question the plausibility of proposition (1)—the creation of a “public theology”—should not lose sight of the fact that they too are seeking to advance social/economic justice. (The reviewer is such a skeptic.) The dissenters from such a grand hope do not have to throw out the anthology to get on with their smaller “visions,” though. The materials contained in it are elucidating to all concerned. It is always helpful to learn more about what those with whom we differ (in scope or content) believe or
hope, for their thoughts will at least sharpen and impact our own thoughts and motives which, along with our actions, are extremely important to God (Prov. 27:17 and 1 Corinthians 4:5).

Those who share the hope of the editors, and are on the egalitarian side of these issues, will find the anthology a treasure trove of information and encouragement. The quality of the readings is excellent. They are quite diverse, and have been selected to bring a clear focus to the mission articulated by the editors. Egalitarians will find the arguments persuasive, even if they are not to those who view the problems through “different glasses.” But there is sufficient depth of content here to sustain the integrity of their own world view.

Finally, for those who are professedly libertarian and find the fourth segment of the mission an inappropriate way to respond to the clear Biblical call for the righteous to be “concerned for the rights of the poor” (Prov. 29:7; 31:8-9), the anthology is still a significant work to possess and use in their own study, and in the classroom, for reasons stated earlier. The essays demand that attention be given to the teaching of morals, values, and ethics. The editors do all readers a real service by bringing to the conscious level a number of significant questions that will challenge everybody’s presuppositions. What institutions or groups of people will shape the moral discourses of the next century? If not the major multinational corporations, then who? How are the realities of God’s creation that are reflected in His special revelation, and the created order, regarding equality and inequality, similarity and diversity, and superiority and inferiority to be reconciled in a holy and just manner in the marketplace? Do either egalitarian or libertarian models hold the key? Without the active indwelling work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of God’s children, along with a God-formed world view that is hammered out in the context of a God guided “common grace,” can widespread economic justice become a part of the fabric of the marketplace?

OMB will be a great stimulus, and a true asset, for anyone willing to wrestle with these issues. All professionals wanting to advance the cause of justice in the marketplace ought to have the tome in their possession as a resource material. A teacher’s world view, classroom pedagogy, and course objectives will undoubtedly determine her or his desire to make use of the work in the classroom. It does deserve to be in every good college or university library, however. It is a substantive and notable work.