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Mere Morality

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Book Reviews

MERE MORALITY: WHAT GOD EXPECTS FROM ORDINARY PEOPLE. By Lewis B. Smedes. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983. 276 pages.

Mere Morality is a very readable book about some of the agonizing moral challenges and dilemmas facing most of us in this latter part of the twentieth century. The title is chosen by the author to stress the link between morality and humane living. It is not a question of being a saint or a hero or a devout Christian. It is not for believers only, nor is it mysterious nor sectarian. It is concerned with the minimum that ordinary people must do to follow the plan of God and live as human beings in a community with other human beings. If we are fortunate enough to be Christians and sincerely trying to model our life on Christ's, we can, with grace, even love as Jesus loved, thus becoming fully human, loving as God made us to love in the first place.

The author writing from a Reformed Calvinist, Evangelical background, chooses the commandments as revelatory of God's will for ordinary people, at all times, as his creatures and his children, (given to Moses on Sinai and reinforced by Christ in Galilee). Having reaffirmed the commandments Christ demonstrated that their purpose was to point the way to a loving community. Jesus saw that the commandments depended on love and could be summed up in the two great commandments of loving God and loving our neighbor. Love turns the negative "don't's" into positive "do's." The passive avoidance of evil leads to the active doing of good under the influence of love.

Smedes focuses on the five commandments which involve respect for other persons and life in community. The family, marriage, property, communication, and the preservation of life are his main concerns. He then asks *what* does God command us to do? *Why* does he command this? And *how* can we obey Him in the ambiguities and conflicts of modern life, so incredibly different from the simple uncomplicated life of biblical times?

The *what* is discovered in the Bible where we find, for example, God's passion for justice, and the basic human rights that God has given to all his children made in his image and likeness. The Bible assumes these rights and

the moral obligations that flow from them. The Bible does not have to tell us to love but seeks to guide love back to its source, to God who is love.

The *why* is answered by showing that God as a reasonable Creator only commands us to be what we should be, to act in ways that fit our nature as human beings in community. No nation could ever endorse or encourage stealing, murder, adultery, lying. We have to accept the basic teachings of God's commandments if we wish to survive as human beings in a community. We really have no choice. Even though the commandments may be honored more in the breach than in the observance, still the need for them persists. "Faith assumes that what God asks of us is also good for us precisely because what he asks matches his original design for our lives" (p. 104).

It is in the *how* that Smedes points up many of our most pressing contemporary moral problems, wherein it might seem that an exception to the law could be justified. "So when we ask 'how' we will be asking for some guidelines that will work, not only for me in my emergency, but for everyone in similar situations who want to know whether God himself will say that it was *right* to break one of his commandments" (p. 18). With this lofty ideal in mind Smedes approaches some of the thorny questions that seem to allow a violation of God's commandments.

With regard to capital punishment Smedes concludes that the commandment "Thou shall not kill," filtered through the realities of life, allows for self-defense through capital punishment but not as a regular policy. "The word from the Lord, especially when we read it through the lens of love, is 'Do not kill any, not the weakest, not the worst, of the human family, for everyone is in the image of God'" (p. 124).

Facing the modern scourge of abortion, "one of the hardest moral questions of our time," Smedes concludes that the Bible can only give testimony to God's love and concern about fetal life but not about its precise status. The arguments to establish precisely when fetal life becomes personal life have not been convincing for Smedes. The fact is that even the most pro-life mother is usually not concerned about a spontaneous abortion in the first weeks of pregnancy. Regret? Yes. Concern about the fetal tissue or its disposal? No. "No one holds a funeral service for a miscarried fetus, nor have we ever thought seriously of giving a zygote the legal status of person. In the past we have not really believed that a fetus of early days is to be treated like a person" (p. 133).

Smedes feels that the only way to have an honorable peace in the abortion battle is to accept a compromise, "a non-quite absolute anti-abortion position" (p. 137). He would allow a tragic, painful exception in the first six weeks only for compelling reasons. The usual reasons offered—e.g., prohibiting abortion is invading a woman's privacy, etc.—are discussed and rejected. "A tolerant society is not tolerant of everything. A free society does not permit everything. Nor does a just, compassionate, wise society open the

door for everyone to make any decision he wishes" (p. 140). Smedes would permit abortion during the first six weeks since no one can be sure that the fetus is a person at that stage. For Smedes the most reasonable view is that it is not a person (p. 143). In the period from the sixth week to the twelfth week abortion should be severely restricted to cases of real danger to the life of the mother or pregnancies due to rape. He would also allow abortion at that stage to prevent the birth of a fetus with certain serious—"even monstrous" — congenital defects. After the twelfth week, to abort the fetus would be a crime against society. Smedes concludes by saying an absolute prohibition against all abortions would not be a good law politically speaking, but the law of the land should be heavily weighted on the side of the right of the fetus to live. Any exception must be carefully considered. "Society should control abortion with the eye of a moral hawk and the heart of a compassionate angel" (p. 145).

Smedes, a married man, treats of marriage by looking at it in its biblical setting.

Families are for the kingdom of God. Marriage is for families. And therefore, since sex is for marriage, sex is for the kingdom of God. Maybe only a logic like this can counterbalance the seductive 'nowness' of our romantic culture. This view of fidelity manages, I believe, to set sexual fidelity in a picture larger than the profile of your own and my own marriage covenant. It sees sex and adultery within the setting of the history of one's own future family and of God's future family (p. 167).

Taking the evidence from the Bible and considering the signals hinted at from experience Smedes says that "We move, as it were, from this sense that sexual intercourse is very appropriate to marriage to the conviction that it is inappropriate outside of marriage" (p. 168). Yet even with regard to adultery Smedes will not take an absolutist position. While rejecting the situation ethic's position of Joseph Fletcher that love can generally justify extra-marital sex, Smedes would admit exceptions in extreme cases (p. 174). Imagining the case of a woman yielding to a mad man's sexual aggression to save the life of her child, Smedes says that it would be allowed as life-saving but it would seem to be offensive to speak of it as adultery (p. 177). Such extreme cases "lie outside the arena where we make ordinary free decisions. We cannot use them as the starting point for a line of reasoning that could finally justify adultery as a way of coping with the everyday burdens of living" (p. 178).

Thus Smedes adopts what he sees as a middle ground between the two extremes of situation ethics which easily allows exceptions to the commandments, offering love as a justification, and an absolutist position which would rule out every exception.

Life is also broken. In a broken world, it is necessary sometimes to break a commandment. It may be necessary to lie to save a person. It may be necessary to kill a person to save a cause. But the exceptions need to be carefully guarded; they must underscore and not undermine the rule . . . commandment-breaking must be an exceptional event. Single and exceptional acts of breaking cannot be used to justify other breaking as a rule. The word for everyone in general remains: Do not lie! Do not steal! Do not kill! Obey the commands! (p. 242).

Smedes puts great emphasis on the circumstances or facts of each case, citing Thomas Aquinas (Ia, 2ae, quest. 94, art. 4) who cautioned centuries ago that the more we "descend into detail" in particular cases, the more we have to hedge the simple command with "caution and qualification" (p. 17). Current Catholic writings in moral theology are also much concerned with the question of exceptions with regard to moral norms. In his annual summary of moral theology in 1973, Richard A. McCormick, S.J. asked, "Are there exceptionless moral norms? This question has been treated by many authors over the past four or five years . . . the question is very important, because at its heart is the discussion about the deontological or teleological character of normative statements" (*Notes on Moral Theology*, 1965-1980, University Press of America, 1981, p. 431).

Not all will agree with every conclusion of Smedes but most will find his approach appealing. He communicates a pastoral sensitivity and awareness in a very readable style. Professors of ethics and moral theology will find the book thought-provoking and fruitful for class discussions and seminars on contemporary moral problems. The questions at the end of each chapter are meant to spark discussion and reflection.

A reader may wonder why Smedes did not consult outstanding Catholic authors who have struggled with the same agonizing problems, e.g., the much discussed case of Mrs. Bergmaier, a German lady captured by the Russians at the end of the war and imprisoned at a camp in the Ukraine while her husband was sent to Wales as a prisoner of the allies. He was returned to Germany and reunited with the children. Mrs. Bergmaier heard through the underground that her husband and children were safe and desperately longing for her. Her only way to escape was to become pregnant. That meant committing adultery with one of the guards which she did and was released and rejoined her family. Fletcher has no problem justifying her adultery because it was done for love. Smedes has a difficult time justifying the adultery and concludes that "the most we can conclude from Mrs. Bergmaier's agapic adultery is that justified adultery is not unthinkable" (p. 174). It seems to this writer that Smedes would have profited from consulting the many discussions of this now famous "Mrs. Bergmaier case" as found in recent Catholic moral theologians' writings.

In general, Smedes would have added more value to his book if he had indicated his points of agreement and/or disagreement with the main schools of moral theology.

A striking example of Smedes disagreeing with a centuries-old tradition jarred this reader. In treating of divorce and remarriage Smedes states that Christ condemned divorce but was not concerned about the morality of subsequent remarriage. "If we see that Jesus is indicting divorce and is not singling out remarriage, we are free to deal with the past in a realistic manner, and to hold out hope for a new beginning. The important issue is whether after a divorce a previous marriage is really over . . . The human reality in history is that covenants made and dissolved are dead; maybe they ought not to have been dissolved, and often not made, but once made and dissolved they are past and done with" (p. 180). Smedes then cites Scripture and applies it to remarriage: "forgetting those things that are behind we press on toward the high calling in Christ" (Phil. 3:13). "The past does not wholly bind us" (p. 181). This use of Scripture seems almost glib and not at all characteristic of the author. He does give references to some exegetes who would support his interpretation but he seems unaware of the fact that he has wandered into an area of intense theological dispute among Catholic theologians who all start with the supposition that Christ condemned divorce *and* subsequent remarriage as adultery. One of the leading advocates for a change in the Catholic official approach to the divorced and remarried, Kevin T. Kelly, takes it for granted that for Christ "divorce could only be thought of within the category of human sin and so any remarriage after divorce had to be condemned as adultery" (*Divorce and Second Marriage*, 1982, Collins, London, p. 57). The task of Kelly, to try and justify a second marriage, would have been much easier if he accepted Smedes' interpretation of the words of Christ that the "adultery is the divorce, not the remarriage" (p. 180), but he could not disregard a tradition of such long standing as easily as Smedes did. Still we must honor the strong affirmation that Smedes makes for fidelity in marriage with his typical rich pastoral insights, e.g. "You will change, the person to whom you make the vow will change, your circumstances will change. Moreover, the person you vow to live with is in some ways the wrong person for you . . . no one ever marries the right person. But, if you are a vow-keeper, you are likely to do in the changing future what you promised in the unchangeable past . . . The commandment calls us to be vow-keepers in defiance of our culture" (p. 161).

It is hoped that this review will lead those involved in forming young people (and the not so young) to buy it and reflect on its conclusions while imbibing its pastoral concern and awareness. All will be the richer for the experience.

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