

THE STRANDS THAT SHAPED CATHOLIC MORAL THEOLOGY

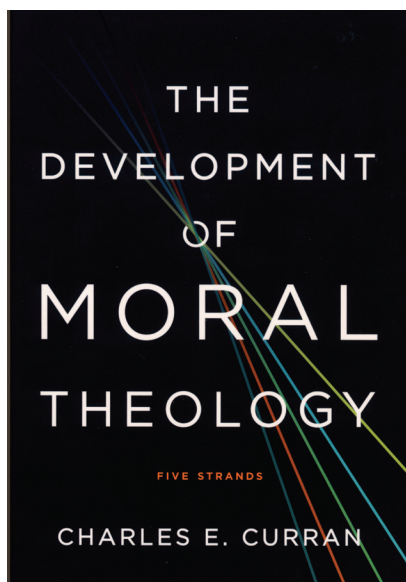
REVIEWED BY RON HAMEL, PhD

Reading and studying history have a way of providing perspective. They shed light on the past, helping to explain why things occurred as they did, what they meant and what effect they had. They also shed light on the present, putting it into context, illuminating how things got this way and powerfully reminding that they haven't always been this way and don't need to remain so in the future.

Moral theologian Charles E. Curran's recent book, *The Development of Moral Theology: Five Strands*, provides this kind of perspective. The Elizabeth Scurlock University Professor of Human Values at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Curran examines in his usual clear and thorough manner the historical development of five elements, or strands, constitutive of Catholic moral theology and which differentiate it from other articulations of Christian ethics. He also looks at how these elements shape Catholic moral theology today.

The five strands are sin, reconciliation and the manuals of moral theology; Thomas Aquinas and the Thomistic tradition; natural law; the papal teaching office; and the Second Vatican Council. A final chapter examines "where we stand today and in the immediate future" with regard to each strand and its influence on the discipline of Catholic moral theology. It lays out Curran's own approach to moral theology and reflects upon the moral teaching of the magisterium and what Curran refers to as the "authority problem" in today's church.

Curran's discussion of natural law, the third strand, is illustrative of what a historical approach can offer. Natural law has been a perennial theme in



THE DEVELOPMENT OF MORAL THEOLOGY: FIVE STRANDS

BY CHARLES E. CURRAN

Georgetown University Press, 2013

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law, history, philosophy and theology, within and outside of the Catholic tradition, for more than 2,000 years. It has been appealed to as a source of moral insight that Christians share with all people and as a law for determining how people should live their lives. Curran begins by discussing the earliest understandings of natural law outside the Catholic tradition. He concludes this examination with the observation that "there has never been a coherent, monolithic theory of natural law with an agreed-upon body of ethical content existing throughout history."

Curran goes on to examine: approaches to natural law within the

Christian tradition in the Scholastic (medieval) period; Thomas Aquinas; the neo-Scholastic period following Aquinas; papal teaching on moral matters; Vatican II; new natural law theories and Pope Benedict XVI. He concludes his analysis with the same observation with which he concluded his review of the understanding of natural law outside the Christian tradition: "The historical section has shown that there is no such thing as the natural law understood as a monolithic theoretical system with an agreed-upon body of ethical content existing from the medieval Scholasticism to the present day."

Curran identifies four ambiguities in the Catholic natural law tradition. First, did theory or practice come first? Curran claims that a discernment process employing a variety of sources worked out the church's moral teachings long before the development of Scholastic natural law theories. Natural law reasoning came along later to explain systematically and thematically why particular positions were accepted or condemned. "[I]t is a mistake," Curran maintains, "to see that the morality of the action was always determined by the application of the method to the particular issue."

The second ambiguity is whether natural law consists primarily in a method or in conclusions? Curran notes that historically, natural law has referred to both, though method is the central reality. "It is by using the method," he says, "that one comes to the conclusions." But in papal teaching, the emphasis is and has been on the conclusions, not the method.

The third ambiguity is the relationship between natural law and morality. Curran explains that the best of the

Catholic tradition insists on an intrinsic morality, that is, something is commanded because it is good, because it promotes human flourishing. However, in some instances of moral teaching, it seems to be the magisterium of the church that makes something morally wrong. Something is deemed to be wrong because the church says it is wrong, regardless of other arguments.

The fourth ambiguity appears in two different contemporary papal approaches to natural law — one dealing with sexual and medical issues and the

other with social issues. Curran leaves it to the reader to probe the implications of these historical findings.

This is a fascinating, instructive and thought-provoking volume that provides a marvelous historical overview of the development of key elements of Catholic moral theology. It also raises numerous questions about current embodiments of moral theology as well as the Catholic position on a number of moral issues — in some cases, with regard to the position itself, and in other cases, with regard to the arguments un-

derlying those positions.

Scholars and graduate students will find this volume highly rewarding, but so will a more general audience eager to learn about a major segment of the Catholic theological tradition and who are willing to have their assumptions and thinking challenged, not so much by the author, but rather by the historical picture he paints that puts Catholic moral theology in perspective.

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