Marcia Y. Riggs and James Samuel Logan, eds


This text introduces and exemplifies contemporary social ethics through an impressive collection of fifteen essays from model scholars, including Katie Cannon, James Cone, Dwight Hopkins, Anthony Pinn, Emilie Townes, and Traci West. The book is designed and succeeds as a useful text for advanced undergraduate and graduate level courses in Christian social ethics. The entries are concise, averaging fourteen pages, and are arranged thematically in four parts: moral dilemmas, moral community, moral discourse and moral vision. With the student in mind, the editors have included at the end of each part a list of key concepts, discussion questions and suggested resources for further study.

There are two operative presuppositions at work in this volume. First, what ‘matters’ is the direct ethical confrontation of challenges to survival, such as poverty, violence, and environmental degradation. Second, in the course of confronting these kinds of issues, social ethicists do not have the privilege of a neutral or objective perspective and so must attend responsibly to their diverse sources of knowledge and insight as contextual, historical, and particular. The normative claims that emerge from such work and drawing on these sources are universally relevant but, as the editors point out, cannot be ‘universalized for all time’ (p. 2). The particular contexts and histories out of which this collection emerges are the African, Caribbean and African-American. The specific challenge to which this book contributes mightily is the first step in a mutually critical and constructive dialogue across socio-cultural divides: the cultivation of an understanding of the perspective, insights, and normative claims that emerge from the contexts that these diverse authors represent.

The arrangement and ordering of the text are well-suited to the task. The four essays on moral dilemmas (part one) serve to create, through concrete and particular reflections, the discursive and imaginative space where new insights and articulations about the rupture, creation, and evolution of ‘community’ (part two) can find purchase. An analysis and description of the moral language and practices (part three) that emerge from this particular communal history reveal and provide resources to combat its especially racial and violent aspects. The knowledge, wisdom, and insight cultivated to this point are gathered up and put to work in the development of broad and constructive visions (part four) that include normative prescriptions of universal relevance.

Among the highlights of the opening section on ‘Moral Dilemmas’ is Pinn’s constructive critique and augmentation of Peter Paris’ work on spirituality and embodiment. He convincingly argues that the material embodiments of the
African diaspora are not merely the incidental content of spirituality but its very form. He goes on to highlight the ways in which this focus on embodiment enables a more authentic ‘cartography of spirituality’ (p. 19).

In the second part on ‘Moral Community’ one finds superb introductory essays on the experience of race in the United States that serve as surveys of the racial terrain. Cone’s essay treats the experience of race in a more general sense and concludes with an exhortation to specific and constructive forms of dialogue among those with different racial experiences. Hopkins employs his very public experiences during the first presidential campaign of Barack Obama as an entry and exit point for describing the emergence and contours of black liberation theology.

The third part concerns ‘Moral Discourse’ and also is focused on the United States. Baldwin challenges the reader to critique constructively the discursive contributions of church communities to the broader social concern for racial justice by way comparison to the prophetic ecclesiology of Martin Luther King, Jr. Walton joins Baldwin in exhorting churches to take up the prophetic voice but focuses especially on the need to critique those Christian voices that are pressed into service in support of the very policies and practices that King abhorred, including the likes of Jerry Falwell. West brings into view the presence of gender violence overlaid with racial difference, providing a trenchant analysis and critique of the disconnect between our culture’s professed rejection of gender violence and yet its inability to institutionalize that commitment.

Each contributor to the final part on ‘Moral Vision’ emphasizes what Anderson implies in his title: ‘in the absence of giants,’ especially, it falls to each of us to find creative ways to embody and practice justice. Townes, for example, in dialogue with the work of Zora Neale Hurston, brings into view the resources for this that can be found in the folklore traditions and challenges scholars to move in the direction of dialogical research on these matters alongside everyday folks.

Creative and constructive insights suffuse this well-edited volume. A few essays are dense and presuppose a good deal of historical and theological knowledge. Most, however, well introduce their topics and terms while also including the detail necessary to convey a realistic and complex understanding. I recommend for others, and plan to use myself, this flexible text in courses on theology and social ethics.

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