

Review

Bioethics: A Primer for Christians (4th ed), by Gilbert Meilaender, Grand Rapids, William B. Eerdmans, 2020, xv + 156pp. (paperback). ISBN 978-0-8028-7816-8

By E. Ashley Moyse

In a book written for Christians, Gilbert Meilaender directs his reader to matters familiar to perennial bioethics discussions and debates. After a brief review of his approach, which is informed by a particular understanding of the Christian moral life that not all would share, Meilaender surveys the debates concerning procreation versus reproduction, abortion, genetic advance, prenatal screening, suicide and euthanasia, refusing treatment, issues of conscience and decision, organ donation, human experimentation, embryo procurement and use, and, finally, sickness and health.

Meilaender's primer is a widely used volume for both undergraduate and seminary courses introducing the study of bioethics from a Christian perspective. This updated edition includes recent developments, such as gene editing techniques that are increasingly of interest to persons enamoured by the potentialities of manipulating genetic information. The updates are predominantly descriptive, providing current detail without engaging important arguments across the landscape of theologically informed bioethics. This landscape includes a range of voices from the Christian East and West and relies on hermeneutical and moral traditions not discussed. While maintaining its previous digest structure and composition, Meilaender's updates fill significant lacunae in Christian bioethics for both scholars and new students of the field.

The limited engagement with contemporary scholarship is seen in the discussion of procreation and reproduction. Meilaender makes clear that procreation continues as an intrinsic good to sexual intercourse between a man and a woman and to the calling of such married life. Yet not all who are married are gifted with biological children. Deliberately choosing not to procreate is a question that has been explored in the Anglican tradition since the Lambeth conference of 1930. Other married persons seek out adoption or other forms of guardianship. The possibility of married life without children, or with children through adoption, as with the possibility of singleness/celibacy, opens up theological discussions concerning the role of the church family and of covenant partnerships marked by fidelity, durability, and the struggle to understand fruitfulness in the present age, between the now and not yet.

For example, questions can be raised about the limits of ‘biology’ as a norm for the Christian family. Theologians like Stanley Hauerwas in *Dispatches from the Front* and John Swinton in *A Graceful Embrace*, edited with Brian Brock, have argued for less emphasis on the biological importance of parenting. Students of kinship, like Michael Banner in *The Ethics of Everyday Life*, have questioned the priority of blood ties that persists within both Christian notions of procreation and novel reproductive techniques that enable persons to have their own children. This scholarship raises new questions and illuminates the rationalities that persist in church and world around conception and birth, children and parenting. The chapter on procreation and reproduction fails to engage active conversations at the intersection of theology and bioethics.

The analysis of the Christian position on euthanasia is also missing important voices. Paul Badham’s *Is there a Christian Case for Assisted Dying*, for example, introduces a theologically considered argument in support of assisted dying. While it may remain a minority view among Christian theologians, it still is a voice in the conversation, along with statements in support of assisted dying put forward by George Carey and Desmond Tutu. Moreover, bioethical debate requires critical study of late modern preoccupations shaped by economic and technological rationalities as well as liberal political ideals, like autonomy, which have influenced with great impact the rhetoric and imaginings of persons living and dying through the present age. A recent study by Ioannis Bekos, *Euthanasia and Patristic Tradition*, makes an important contribution to discussions at the intersection of theology and (assisted) dying. Jeffrey Bishop’s interrogative and genealogical study of the metaphysics of modern medicine, *The Anticipatory Corpse*, is another important example.

Further attention to contemporary scholarship is needed and a diligent refocusing of discussions in theology and ethics might help to challenge the content and context in which late modern bioethics are considered. This refocused and critical and constructive scholarship is needed today. While Meilaender’s primer remains a thoughtful introductory text, familiarising its reader with a range of bioethical questions and concerns, it needs to be read alongside both complementary and contrary texts as well as specialist treatments of issues. Perhaps this is the point of any primer – it cannot stand on its own but excites the reader toward further study.

The issues identified in this fourth edition of *Bioethics* are properly discussed by both Christian theologians and the wider public. Meilaender’s book introduces his readers to important bioethical issues. The adept style and consistent clarity of all

Meilaender's work invites them to consider the relevance and import of a Christian bioethics. For that reason, Meilaender remains a voice to learn with and from.

E. Ashley Moyse, PhD, is a McDonald Postdoctoral Fellow in Christian Ethics and Public Life at the McDonald Centre for Theology, Ethics and Public Life, Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Oxford.

Author copyright.

E. Ashley Moyse, review of *Bioethics: A Primer for Christians*, by Gilbert Meilaender, Northwest Institute for Ministry Education Research. www.nimer.ca, (*date posted*).