

THE CHICAGO LITERARY CLUB
BOOK REVIEW NIGHT
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A Review of

THE MAKING OF MORAL THEOLOGY

by John Mahoney, S.J.

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Two books led me to this review. First, I read LIARS POKER by Michael Lewis; then I read BARBARIANS AT THE GATE by Bryan Burrough and John Helyar. If you are looking for entertaining reading, I recommend them highly. They both provide an inside look at the swinish and sometimes illegal behavior that characterized much of the investment banking business in the 1980's. You do not have to embrace socialism to be repelled by the goings-on in the corridors of power in and around Wall

Street. It is not just the lack of business ethics that is so distasteful - it is the sheer personal unpleasantness of many of the characters that appalls.

LIARS POKER, as many of you will recall, takes its title from a very simple game played with the serial numbers on dollar bills. Bluffing is at a premium. It is usually a harmless game, but it makes you wonder when the leading bond traders at Salomon Bros. are playing it for stakes of up to one million dollars! The author of the book was hired out of the London School of Economics to work for Salomon, and remained for long enough to learn that, while you may start out as a "geek", the Salomon term for trainee, you could eventually hope to be a "Big Swinging Dick" - one of the traders who earned millions for the company. Lewis has written a disturbing but captivating book about the day to day antics at Salomon Bros. If you wonder how that company could have gone so seriously wrong, to the point that its survival was in question after the U.S. Treasury bond trading scandal, this is the book for you.

BARBARIANS AT THE GATE is in its way a more serious book. It concerns the takeover of R.J.Reynolds Tobacco by Nabisco, which resulted in RJR Nabisco, and the ultimate downfall of Ross Johnson, the creator of the conglomerate, after he decided to try for a leveraged buy out. Johnson, who had solidified his position with his board of directors through what could only be described as bribery, found himself the unwilling presider over the sale to a hostile buyer. The authors are former Wall Street Journal reporters who covered the story as it unfolded and then took a leave of absence to turn their material into a book. They interviewed all of the major players in the drama, and were close enough to capture all the fascinating personal details, including the decor of the corporate jets and the favored colors for the company limousines.

As I said at the beginning, however, I am not reviewing those two books, nor am I going to do more than mention DEN OF THIEVES, by James B. Stewart, the story of Michael Milken's rise and fall. These books prompted me to reflect on the value system that allowed petty minded and greedy men to persuade themselves that their positions as bankers, brokers, chief executives, lawyers, accountants or what have you entitled them to ignore the needs of thousands of workers and consumers dependent on the system they were manipulating.

I turn now to the book I am going to review: THE MAKING OF MORAL THEOLOGY, subtitled "A Study of the Roman Catholic Tradition", by John Mahoney, a Scots Jesuit and professor at the University of London. The book is based on the Martin D'Arcy Lectures delivered by Mahoney at Oxford in 1981 and 82.

I chose this book for review because I found it a fascinating introduction to the foundations of our modern views of moral behaviour - what is and what isn't. Does Mahoney's book have application to the problems of American business described so well in the first two books I mentioned and in the other two books reviewed this evening? I believe it does.

Loyola University of Chicago sponsored a study about four years ago concerning the role of religion in business decision making. 2,000 business executives, managers and administrators were surveyed. They were randomly selected, with a balance of large and small business, and a fair representation according to race, sex and religion. 1,166 responded, and their answers showed that, to three out of four, religious values indeed influence their behaviour; almost half claimed that "religion has a significant impact on business decisions." (p.4- Chicago Studies)

At this point, I should make it clear that Mahoney's book has no specific solutions to the difficult moral and economic questions of leveraged buy-outs and junk bonds. It is a book about morals in general, and in particular the historical development of that particular branch of theology known as "moral theology".

Mahoney approaches his study from six vantage points: first, the influence of the Roman Catholic practice of open confession of sin, second, the influence of St. Augustine, third, the concept of the supernatural, fourth, the concept of authority in the church, fifth, the concept of subjectivity, and sixth, the influence of the language of law. Mahoney concludes with a case study in modern moral theology, the promulgation of the encyclical Humanae Vitae, and a closing chapter on the impact of renewal called for in the 1950's by the Second Vatican Council.

Confession, or the sacrament of penance (now the preferred nomenclature in the church) has significantly shaped the church's approach to the nature of sin. Both Hebrew and Christian scripture use the language of law and the courts to describe God's dealing with men. This has led to the development in the church of a legalistic approach to sin and its consequences, although another reading of the very same scripture might lead believers to put the focus on a "reconciling forgiveness" as an alternative to the legalistic approach. In practice, however, the church put its emphasis on exclusion of the sinner from communion and a readmittance to the community of believers only after the legal details had been attended to. In Mahoney's words, "the consequence has been that the mentality stimulating ... over-systematization, and then in turn feeding on it, has impelled moral theology to view sin as above all a transgression of law, and has inculcated concepts of divine justice and retribution, and of God himself, which have bitten deep into the

spiritual lives of millions." (p. 35) As a reaction to this legalism, the church has responded at the pastoral level with a contrasting view of a "medical or healing ministry", but Mahoney points out this analogy also has its limits. He says, "... if the Sacrament of reconciliation is not to be located forever in the Old Bailey, no more is it now to be found exclusively in Harley Street." (p.36)

Mahoney then turns to St. Augustine, the subject of nearly as many critical modern studies as Abraham Lincoln or John F. Kennedy. Original sin dominated Augustine's thinking and writing. In the City of God, he said, "our righteousness in this life consists in the forgiveness of sins rather than in the perfection of virtues." This pessimistic view, based as it was on the finest synthesis of classical learning with Christian spirituality in the first five centuries of the church, had an enormous impact on the development of moral theology. Mahoney says that Augustine's mental dualism makes for "good rhetoric, and certainly for rousing polemics" but does "not always make for good theology." (p.69) He continues, "... the church was not born Augustinian. And although for 1500 years it has experienced something more than an Augustinian moment in its moral thinking, it now appears to be in the difficult process of shaking off its long Augustinian mood." (p.71)]

Augustine was of course not the only follower of classical learning in the early church. The concepts of nature and natural law, and the concept of the supernatural were adopted and adapted by many early Christian writers in their treatment of ethical thought and conventions. They found little or no difficulty in appealing to, for example, the Stoic teaching on universal order and reason as consonant with the teaching of Jesus. At different times in the church's history this has led to different conclusions about morality. For example, Augustine had no patience for the "virtuous pagan"; he saw pagan virtues, if such existed, as counterfeits of true virtue motivated by love of the Christian God. Other, and especially more recent Christian authors, have developed the concept of the "anonymous Christian". (p.100) Karl Rahner says that it does not matter how deeply one may believe "there is no God"; what matters is the implicit acceptance of God's grace by a person who "undertakes and lives the duty of each day in the quiet sincerity of patience, in devotion to his material duties and the demands made upon him by the persons under his care". (p.101) This approach might appear to inflict belief upon the unwilling atheist or agnostic and has been viewed as patronizing by some. It might even be thought of as a threat to the autonomy of the supernatural. Thomas Aquinas, however, found the precepts of the Christian scripture substantially the same as the precepts of Hebrew scripture, and both to add very little to the precepts of the law of nature. (p.107). In more recent years, Ronald Knox has said, "Neither Catholicism nor any other form of Christianity pretends to have a

special morality of its own; religion is meant to enforce, not to supersede, the natural code of morals." (p.103)

The "magisterium" is a term that now has the connotation of "teaching authority" of the Roman church. Merely mentioning the word these days can stir up heated arguments over church teaching and the related issue of papal infallibility, but the concept can be treated neutrally, and Mahoney points out that, in the past, it did not mean "teaching authority", much less the teaching activity of the church's hierarchy. (p. 116) A more legitimate approach to the concept stems from the gospel of Matthew, which, in Mahoney's words, "is the one most interested, even pre-occupied, with Jewish-Christian questions, such as the fulfilment of the [Hebrew scripture] prophecies and Law, problems of sabbath observance and marriage legislation. It appears also to be the Gospel most interested in the Church as a visible, structured organization. Given all these factors it is not implausible to see in the closing scene of Matthew and the commissioning of the Apostles as authorized teachers to extend Christ's own teaching a picture emerging from a predominantly Judaeo-Christian community of a juridical, and even rabbinical, authoritative accreditation of Jesus' own personal envoys to the growing Church." (p.173-74)

In the making of moral theology, the distinction between subjective morality and objective morality, is in Mahoney's view, one of the most challenging. Subjective morality is what you, or I, think about the moral goodness of your, or my, activities. Objective morality is a judgment made in accordance with an external standard. Peter Abelard was one of the first scholars to stress subjectivity as the basis for evaluation of moral behaviour, although he also recognized an intrinsic morality which made some actions evil in themselves. St. Thomas Aquinas subjected moral acts to a tripartite analysis in which reason invoked the law of nature, aided by divine law, to classify acts as morally good, morally bad, or indifferent. Duns Scotus and William of Occam questioned this analysis; their nominalism and the elimination of nature as a valid source of moral insight led them to present morality as "an immediate encounter, or better, confrontation, between the individual and the will of God." (p. 184). The theme of conscience is the prominent feature of subjectivity, and it has appeared frequently in the development of moral theology, beginning with mentions in Christian scripture. In the modern church, it is now accepted that "some form of interior intuitional judgemental activity is part of normal Christian living." (p.207) This does not mean, however, that the church now teaches that you can let your conscience be your guide in all things. The tension in the modern church's treatment of conscience stems from the weight which the believer may give to experience as compared to the weight which the believer is obligated to give to the interior guidance of the Holy Spirit. This issue is unresolved in the church no less than

in society at large, as, on occasion, the non-believer, or neutral observer, may question his own moral judgments.

Mahoney continues his study with an analysis of the "language of law", which starts, for the Judaeo-Christian tradition, with the Ten Commandments as a "Mosaic treaty struck by God with his people". (p.224) Christian scripture treats the law both as a new commandment but also as a perfection of old law. The statement and restatement of law has been a primary concern of moral theology throughout the common era, and Christian treatment of the language of law has been, if anything, more convoluted than treatment of any subject in theology. Mahoney cuts brilliantly to the essence of the issue by quoting first from Wordsworth when the poet describes the weary burden of human freedom in his "Ode to Duty": "Me this unchartered freedom tires; I feel the weight of chance desires: My hopes no more must change their name, I long for a repose that ever is the same." By contrast, Robert Frost, in "Mending Wall" responds to his neighbour's repeated formula "Good fences make good neighbours" by pondering "I wonder/ If I could put a notion in his head:/ Why do they make good neighbours? Isn't it /where there are cows? but here there are no cows." Mahoney says that the question "why" is the "consideration at the heart of the rational approach to law and to morality, as it is at the heart of Frost's poem." (p.258).

Mahoney's book includes a chapter on a working out of a problem in moral theology in the modern church - he boldly tackles the issue of Humanae Vitae the encyclical which upheld the Roman church's traditional teaching on contraception. Without explicitly drawing any conclusions, he points out that an analysis of this document reveals significant flaws in its logic and expression when considered by the church's own generally accepted standards of moral theological practice.

Mahoney's concluding chapter is entitled "A Pattern in Renewal?". He believes that, notwithstanding pronouncements such as Humanae Vitae, there is a "renewal of moral theology in the church." (p.302)

I mentioned earlier that the relevance of Mahoney's book to business ethics is established by the Loyola survey of the impact of religion on business decision making. In that survey, four aspects of business were found to have particular religious dimensions: social responsibility, stewardship, working mothers and vocation. The respondents were, of course, not unanimous in their views on these particular dimensions; the important point is simply that religion and, more generally, ethical and moral behaviour, is on their minds.

This survey, directed by Father Thomas F. McMahon of Loyola, shows that the study of moral theology is relevant to an

examination of the failures of American business described so eloquently in LIARS POKER and BARBARIANS AT THE GATE. Father Mahoney's book does not have the answers, but I commend it to anyone looking for an analytical foundation for your inner conviction that most of the principal players in LIARS POKER and BARBARIANS AT THE GATE are real swine.