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# The moral core of Judaism and Christianity: reclaiming the revolution

Ben Wiebe

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## The Moral Core of Judaism and Christianity

Daniel C. Maguire

Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993

296 pp. \$14 U.S.

Books on theological or religious ethics keep appearing. With a more sober realization of the present human situation there is perhaps a new readiness to examine neglected or overlooked resources. Is there anything new to report? Our knowledge of God is itself moral—to know God is to know God as just and loving. Response to God therefore also has a moral stamp. This work offers an insightful review of themes like justice, hope, truth, and peace for our situation.

The book is in two parts. Part one deals with “The Single Source of Morality and Religion” and part two deals with “Scripting a New Humanity”. Maguire begins by offering a critical review of religion. He makes note of the perceived association of religion with ignorance and magic and with “some of the worst” things in history done “in the name of religion” (17–19).

Questions begin with Maguire’s starting point. It is essential to recognize evils done in the name of religion. He clearly names some of them. But he is simply inadequate in his distinction of what in scripture counts as a dark encumbrance and what as gold. With all his effort to establish his critical credentials, he essentially holds to a flat interpretation of scripture (in his own way much like a “fundamentalist”). To address his charge of misogyny, the opening chapters of Genesis affirm man and woman made in God’s image with woman created as the complementary partner of man. These texts cannot properly be understood in support of misogyny. Human experience malformed by sin issues in misogyny and is certainly reflected in the pages of scripture as it records that experience. What is the direction of God’s action with Israel? As a whole is it an endorsement or is it action within history that leads through and beyond misogyny? In a similar way, with reference to the New Testament, to ask seriously what it would have meant in historical context for Paul to challenge the institution of slavery is to take an important step. Only if we think from a position of power or control do we think of an imposition of the new order on the old. In actual history the way of Christ is not simply an alternative to the present order but a renewed way of living within that order (cf. Philemon).

Maguire highlights an urgency in the present human situation. This work is important in pointing to the resources within Judaism and Christianity for response. He articulates clearly the connection between justice and life together in community. At the same time he sometimes ends up actually undermining or weakening his case. For him the future of humanity cannot depend on the “unanimous” decision on the being of God. It depends on “our common *humanitas* and of the values that will preserve our endangered life together” (x). To begin, we seem to be no closer to

reaching agreement about a common humanity than about God. The future surely cannot depend on a unanimous decision. More than once in history the day has been saved by the "mighty minority".

Now, if none of us is really clear about what we mean when referring to God, we can simply recognize our differences and get on with other more important matters. This is an attractive alternative in the modern setting. There is a place, certainly, for making strategic alignments with various people in specific activities to accomplish certain ends. But what about resources to provide balance, purpose or hope? If God is (rather than "God" being a code word for our own ideals or ideas) and if God acts to reveal himself (rather than being merely a reference to our own best wishes or sincere decisions), then reference to God has a place of ultimate importance. This book is important because it explores the resources of Judaism and Christianity for our contemporary situation. The reader will be provoked, sometimes perhaps to criticism, but often also to insight and perhaps even to action.

Ben Wiebe  
Hamilton, Ontario

## Preaching the Topical Sermon

Ronald J. Allen

Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992

xii + 164 pp.

Ronald J. Allen, Associate Professor of Preaching and New Testament at Christian Theological Seminary, and a Disciples of Christ minister, has set himself the task of restoring the tarnished image of the topical sermon. Other than David Buttrick's model of "preaching in the role of praxis", a somewhat ignored section of his massive *Homiletic*, topical preaching *per se* has been in eclipse since its heyday in Harry Emerson Fosdick's "life situation" model; the tidal wave of the biblical theology movement quite washed it away—and with justification. Allen wisely asserts that "the topical sermon is an occasional alternative to regular expository preaching"; it is "a vitamin supplement to the nourishing fare of regular preaching from the Bible" (4). And he is careful to stress continuously that "the centre of the topical sermon is the interpretation of the topic in light of the gospel" (5), and therefore the preacher who takes up a topic must "analyze [it] with a credible theological method" (4) and in conversation with the Bible.

After locating the topical sermon on the current homiletical map to establish its nature and purpose (Ch. One), Allen discusses eight occasions when a topical sermon is appropriate, e.g., when understanding or action is urgent; when the topic is larger than a single text, image, or theme;