

Book Review: *The Moral Treatment of Returning Warriors in Early Medieval and Modern Times*, Professor Bernard J. Verkamp

Reviewed by John E. Sullivan, May 7, 2010

In his book, *The Moral Treatment of Returning Warriors in Early Medieval and Modern Times*, Professor Bernard J. Verkamp immediately confronts the reader with the contrast between societal responses to returning warriors in Early Medieval and Modern Times.

The following quotes present the backdrop for this "first book-length study devoted exclusively to a scholarly and systematic analysis of how soldiers returning from battle have been, or should be, treated morally."

"... the Christian community of the first millennium generally assumed that warriors returning from battle would or should be feeling guilty or ashamed for all the wartime killing they had done." The community "encouraged [warriors] to seek resolution [of said feelings] through rituals of purification expiation and reconciliation."

"... the moral needs of soldiers returning from Vietnam, for example, were often overlooked by American society."

Dr. Verkamp relates the modern societal response to a pervasive unwillingness to "face up to [the country's] own failure to win the war, or to admit its complicity in a war that may have been unwise or unjust and an occasion for unprecedented atrocities ..." He concludes, "The country as a whole simply chose not [to] take seriously the moral pain felt by many of the Vietnam veterans."

Professor Verkamp explains that what was offered modern warriors upon their return was shaped by "the influence of the Nietzschean aesthetic rebellion." He contends that the impact of this rebellion lead modern society to "ignore the moral pain felt by soldiers returning from modern warfare, by lumping their feelings of guilt and shame together with other symptoms of war neurosis ..."

When the Vietnam Vet is asked, what they were offered when they first returned, those who continue to seek treatment 40 years later reply, "Nothing!" These testimonies by soldiers still haunted by nightmares and flashbacks lend credence to the notion that we continue to miss the mark of treating these men and women holistically.

The author challenges this society and its health practitioners to revisit the function and efficacy of moral treatment. He states, "... viewed within the context of their original rationale ... certain aspects or dimensions of the initial rituals [for the purification, expiation and reconciliation] are shown to be capable of accommodation of modern times along both religious and secular lines and contributing thereby to the genuine reintegration of soldiers by the society that sent them to war in the first place."

Reference: Verkamp, Bernard Joseph. *The moral treatment of returning warriors in early medieval and modern times*. Scranton, Ill: Univ. of Scranton Press, 2006. [[Amazon](#) | [WorldCat](#)]

About the Reviewer:

John E. Sullivan, MSW, LCSW, is the author of [Terror Heart](#), a book about Islamic and Christian cross-cultural communication.

For a fuller discussion of how the inclusion of moral needs and moral pain—issues which have been discarded by the modern treatment approaches—offers a truly holistic approach to assisting modern soldiers, see:

Sullivan J. Treatment of Modern Warriors: A Need for Conscience Sensitive Therapy: a clinician's reflections upon reading *The Moral Treatment of Returning Warriors in Early Medieval and Modern Times*. **Conscience Works: Theory, Research and Clinical Applications**. 2010;3(2): 1-7. [[PDF - 315 KB](#)]