

## Reviews

**CHARACTER AND THE CHRISTIAN LIFE: A STUDY IN THEOLOGICAL ETHICS.**  
by Stanley Hauerwas. San Antonio, Texas. Trinity University Press. 1975. pp. 239  
U.S. 8.00

In some respects it is quite damning to begin a book review with the bland assertion that, really, this book does not say anything new. What it purports to do has been said before. While one must honestly maintain this opinion in regard to Stanley Hauerwas's new book, much of the opening sentence's negative overtones will be diminished when the work is compared with current publications in the area of moral theology.

At a time when much of contemporary Roman Catholic writing in this field is questioning the fundamentals of theological ethics, Hauerwas's book is a welcome return to a balanced, scientifically based method concerning one of the central areas, viz. the nature of human activity. What makes the book not so notable is the fact that much of what the author says can be found in more faithful exponents of Thomistic moral theology in the Roman Catholic Church. The most appealing feature of the work—at least for this reviewer—is the choice of four authors from within the Lutheran and Reformed traditions—Bultmann, Barth, Calvin and Wesley. Moving from within these theological frameworks our author develops his approach through an analysis of the Aristotelian and Thomistic understandings of human activity.

Hauerwas has attempted in the course of his book to enunciate a notion of "character" that will satisfactorily explain that tension in the Christian life between God's action and man's response. By a correct grasp of "character", he feels, one will then be able to affirm "that a real change has taken place in the believer's life" (p. 227), that an on-going process of sanctification occurs, deepening and broadening the Christ-dimension of human activity.

It is vital to appreciate the thought against which Hauerwas is reacting. He is convinced that the Protestant concentration on justification has had a profoundly deleterious effect on many attempts to

understand the nature and moral formation of the self. Emphasis on the "command" aspect of God's dealings with man has resulted in an over-concentration on decision and judgements about specific acts. Such inadequate explanations of the continuum of human activity are overcome by shifting our focus "to the relation between belief and behaviour, thought and action" (p. 230).

Hauerwas proceeds to substantiate his thesis by first of all clarifying some of the theological and philosophical issues that bedevil any appreciation of "character". This first chapter had already appeared in *Theological Studies*, 33(1972), pp. 698-715. "Character" for the author is "the qualification of man's self-agency through his beliefs, intentions and actions, by which a man acquires a moral history befitting his nature as a self-determining being" (p. 11). Thus there is a very intimate link between thought and action on the agent's part. In fact Hauerwas gives an ethical significance and status to the agent's perspective that many contemporary ethicists would deny. By broadening the phenomenology of moral experience beyond moral judgements he hopes to avoid the discontinuities inherent in any approach concentrating primarily on judgement. "Character" is the key, giving historical continuity to the agent's moral life. Such a subjective approach emphasizing the agent's perspective is balanced by the fact that any avowal of intent on the part of the moral agent is made in terms of the community's language, its symbols and practices. Character has, therefore, an inbuilt social dimension. However, the author is at pains throughout to "deny that men are necessarily determined by their societies" (p. 103).

In the third chapter Hauerwas systematically develops many of the concepts outlined in the opening pages, for instance: the notion of the self as agent; the primacy of the agent's perspective in

determining activity; the relation between agency, intention and the social dimension of human action and finally some of the problems associated with any adequate explanation of human action (e.g. motives, intentions, etc.), and the causes of such.

The fifth and final chapter develops in the light of Hauerwas's critique of Calvin's and Wesley's teaching on "sanctification". The author's position hinges on two principles: (a) that "character is the qualification or determination of our self-agency, formed by our having certain intentions (and beliefs) rather than others" (p.115), and (b) that this character "is not just the sum of all that we do as agents, but rather it is the particular direction our agency acquires by choosing to act in some ways rather than others" (p. 117). Thus the sanctification of the Christian, his gradual growth in holiness, "is the continuous unifying of the Christian's intentions through the central image of Jesus Christ....The idea of character therefore provides the means of explicating the nature of the Christian life without separating that life from its source" (p. 231).

Between the three principal chapters of the book are two assessing background sources. Chapter two clearly outlines those aspects of Aristotle's and Aquinas's doctrines on the interrelation of thought and action, habits and virtues. Chapter four illustrates the inadequacies implicit in the theologies of R. Bultmann and K. Barth who, with varying emphasis, use the lang-

uage of command and obedience.

*Character and the Christian Life* is a very good synthesis of the philosophical and theological complexities involved in any thoroughgoing study of human activity. Both dimensions are handled with historical sensitivity. The author shows not only a sound grasp of primary source material but also refers to a wide spectrum of contemporary philosophical writing. His thought is, on the whole, expressed with admirable clarity for so difficult a subject. The use of the phrase "gradual impartation" of holiness (p. 187), and the term "rightwising" of the believer (pp. 185, 193, 215) were not particularly felicitous, I feel. Physically the book is clearly printed, well bound and has a wide inner margin that gives sufficient room for the reader's notes and comments.

Dr Hauerwas has provided us with an excellent example of what Professor Macquarrie calls "practical ecumenism" (*Christian Unity and Christian Diversity*, chapter 3) and on this count the work deserves a place in theological libraries and a reading by those concerned with fundamental issues in moral theology. One would hope that the author will develop his thought, in the future, beyond this somewhat formal study of moral action to the more knotty problems concerning the criteria for and content of the Christian moral life.

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**PROPOSALS FOR A NEW SEXUAL ETHIC:** by Jack Dominian, *Darton, Longman & Todd, London, 1977. 99pp. £1.50*

We owe a debt to Dr. Dominian for trying to work out a christian morality of sex that takes into account the vast increase in knowledge that we now have at our disposal. His work has the strengths and some of the weaknesses you would expect from a moralist whose basic training is in psychiatry.

Briefly, the argument is as follows: among Christians there has been a breakdown of consensus about the criteria for judging the rights and wrongs of sexual activity. Previously there had been a straightforward link between the legitimacy of sexual pleasure and the procreation of children within marriage. This made it fairly easy to pass judgments on sexual

misdemeanours. The farther away the practice was from the norm, the more 'unnatural' it was and therefore the more sinful it was reckoned to be. But now the social facts have changed so much that the traditional morality no longer makes much sense. Most sexual activity, even within marriage, is now "knowingly non-procreative" in function. The pleasure of sexual activity is now easily, and often necessarily, dissociated from the production of a family. Besides this, modern psychology has made a great change in our understanding of the role of sexuality in promoting life. Probably the most important development in modern times has been the realisation that everyone is a sexed being