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BOOK REVIEW

Scott B. Rae. *Moral Choices: An Introduction to Ethics*. 3rd ed. Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2009. 361 pp. Hardback, \$34.99. ISBN 978-0-310-29109-1.

Scott B. Rae is Professor of Philosophy and Ethics at the Talbot School of Theology, which is affiliated with Biola University. He has published many works dealing with the application of Christian ethics to medicine and the marketplace, including these books: *The Ethics of Commercial Surrogate Motherhood*; *Moral Choices: An Introduction to Ethics*; *Brave New Families: Biblical Ethics and Reproductive Technologies*; *Beyond Integrity: A Judeo-Christian Approach to Business Ethics*; and *Body and Soul: Human Nature and the Crisis in Ethics*.

With this third edition of his *Moral Choices: An Introduction to Ethics*, Rae has taken a significant step forward, both in scholarship and readability. *Moral Choices* is greatly suited to be a primary textbook for undergraduate-level coursework in Christian ethics, particularly courses that may be part of a curriculum in pastoral ministry and formation. Rae, a bioethicist by trade, shows he is adept at homing in on compelling ethical conundrums and assessing them in a thorough and altogether winsome fashion. Rae's text approaches key ethical concerns from a philosophical perspective informed by his Christian evangelicalism and biblicism. As a result, each chapter dealing with a particular ethical concern contains a significant amount of exegetical work, which most often precedes any philosophical ruminations Rae may engage in. His is a biblical ethics of the highest order.

The third edition of *Moral Choices* utilizes the same skeleton as the second edition, but the material has been largely reorganized to give points and arguments more clarity. Rae's new material is timely and relevant, as evidenced by the addition of review questions and case studies at the conclusion of every chapter. The changes and additions from the second edition include access to online teaching aids such as PowerPoint presentations

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and study guides, chapters on the ethics of economics covering globalization, environmentalism, and business, greatly expanded sections on stem cell and embryo research, and newspaper-style “clippings” that add pertinent information at a particular juncture. A chapter titled “Major Figures in the History of Ethics,” found in the second edition, has been deleted, and the bulk of its material is now distributed throughout the third edition in the form of clippings.

The first four chapters of *Moral Choices* cover biblical ethics, secular philosophical ethics, and practical decision-making. From the outset it is clear that Rae possesses a special attachment to character- or virtue-based ethics. For Rae, Christian ethics must inform both character and principles, with character being primary. For example, Rae contends that the Old and New Testaments, insofar as they comment on human ethics, display a variety of moral principles that can be individual or corporate. Christians, then, can be utilitarians, can reason according to the fulfillment of duty, or can conduct themselves in an egoist manner without doing violence to faith. Rae does not, however, suggest that all ethical systems are created equal. Those ethical systems that lack biblical mandate—relativism, subjectivism, and emotivism to name three—must be rejected for their unacceptable ethical consequences. Also, a system such as the Divine Command Theory (DCT) may offer a guide toward moral decision-making, but since morality is shaped according to God’s character alone, DCT may not be the substance of ethics.

Chapters 5 through 8 pertain specifically to all forms of medical ethics. Rae’s familiarity with the scientific advances of the day allow him to provide the reader with much additional contextual information concerning flashpoint issues such as abortion, stem cell research, reproductive technologies, biotechnology, and euthanasia. Rae argues forcefully that rights of personhood must be given to pre-born children in virtually all cases. Rae is certainly “conservative” on this score, but he also understands that the art of ethics must allow for a certain fluidity in judgment based upon circumstance. For example, in considering euthanasia, Rae denies that regardless of circumstances, preserving life should be the paramount concern for the

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Christian. At the same time, Rae is equivocal on so-called “enhancement” biotechnology used to treat various diseases, on the grounds that biotechnology falls within the range of gifts God gives to humanity to maintain and promote health.

Chapters 9 through 12 pertain to non-medical issues such as the death penalty, sexual ethics, just war theory, and the ethics of economics. Regarding the death penalty, Rae avers that Christians can justifiably take either side and remain morally and biblically consistent. That said, Rae is not convinced that the current practice by which persons are sentenced to death meets the necessary moral and biblical requirements needed to achieve sufficient certainty of guilt. Moreover, even those Christians that approve of the death penalty must be alarmed at the manner in which the punishment is meted out.

In *Moral Choices*, sexual ethics attends to topics such as premarital sex, homosexuality, and birth control. Rae’s interpretation of relevant biblical texts allows him to reject the first two of these out-of-hand, while giving relative acceptance of the third. Rae is aware that making an unimpeachable philosophical case against homosexuality is difficult, particularly in the secular realm where it has been adopted as a hot ethical topic. Still, for Christians of Rae’s ilk, the biblical case against the practice of homosexuality, if not homosexual orientation, is self-evident. Given the sensitive nature of the contemporary debate over homosexuality, Rae’s candor and unapologetically biblical treatment is refreshing. Unfortunately, the space Rae allots to these topics is too brief, given their complexity and the emerging public concern over reproductive matters.

Chapter 11, the most intriguing chapter in Rae’s book, is his treatment of the just war tradition. Although Rae supports just war theory, he presents both sides of the issue carefully and fairly-mindedly. From the time of Augustine, arguments from just war theory have been a hybrid of philosophy and theology. This is odd given that the vast majority of biblical proofs Rae provides on the subject are pacifist to a greater or lesser degree. Rae’s presentation is strong, but his biblical defense of the just war tradition could be sharpened. Chapter 12, on the ethics of economics, is a useful addendum to the third edition, and favors free

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enterprise systems provided that Christian stewardship of the gifts of God supersedes absolute property rights.

There are some negatives to Rae's volume that must be mentioned. First, Rae's brand of grass-roots ethical reflection is suitable for undergraduate and seminary courses with the purpose of engaging moral issues from the perspective of the evangelical tradition. It would not easily transcend those parameters. Second, *Moral Choices* is thoughtful and even-handed, but non-evangelicals may not resonate with all aspects of Rae's virtue- and character-based ethics. Third, since Rae at times seems unable to jettison or at least disguise his biases prior to considering an ethical dilemma, the results of his considerations may not be appreciated broadly. Lastly, Rae's work would be difficult to utilize in a Canadian context, as the Canadian ethical *ethos* differs considerably from Rae's evangelical ethical tradition.

Moral Choices third edition is a significant improvement on the second edition, and an excellent primer on the key ethical questions facing contemporary Christianity. Christian instructors in ethics will find it a valuable addition to their reading lists, either as a primary or recommended text.

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