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Meilaender's "Bioethics: A primer for Christians, 4th ed." (book review)

Carl P. Olson
Towson University

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Book Reviews



Meilaender, G. (2020). *Bioethics: A primer for Christians*, 4th ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2020. 156 pp.

Meilaender's successful book won wide (but not universal) praise when it appeared in 1996. It has a reasoned tone, a readable and enjoyable text, and a commendable emphasis on weighing the alleged benefits of biotechnology against "areas for concern" for Christians and non-Christians alike. Early and often, Meilaender references Leo Tolstoy's novella *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, whose eponymous hero realizes very late that the truism that all men are mortal means that he is also mortal. That being the case, Meilaender's book for Christians has something to offer to all persons who will someday depart this life.

This edition updates the scientific breakthroughs, such as restored pluripotent stem cells. Many reviewers fault the book for what they believe it ought to have been, either a survey of bioethical issues, an overview of diverse Christian thought about them, or a detached and clinical introduction to bioethics and its attendant controversies. Meilaender avoids this sort of dry textbook format. Each chapter provides very succinct descriptions of issues such as abortion, reproductive technologies, gene therapy and genetic manipulation, organ donation/transplants, medical decisions, end-of-life care, or adoption. Each chapter gives an equally succinct review and reflection upon related Christian teachings. Each explains what aspects are problematic and critique some solutions on offer.

For example, in his chapter on end-of-life decisions, he finds living wills problematic, because even we ourselves can't know how we shall respond when encountering pain or helplessness. To decree in advance what sort of suffering we find unbearable on behalf of our future self is just as imperious as an impersonal medical panel deciding on our fitness to live. Medical powers-of-attorney, on the other hand, involve cultivating trust with another person and endowing them with the authority to make end-of-life decisions on our behalf. The aim is to maximize care over minimizing suffering.

This relational dimension of human life is a theme throughout the book. His greatest service is untangling the issues from the "fog of culture-war" found in popular discussions, allowing non-Christian readers to consider perspectives they may have resisted.

This edition includes a brief new preface, and the prefaces of all previous editions. I found I wished for some updating of his theological references, most of which date from his tenure on the President's Council on Bioethics. Most of his book sources relating to ethics or theology date from the 1970's or earlier.

Libraries will want therefore to supplement this work by acquiring his cited sources and by purchasing more recent book-length treatments of the issues raised in these chapters, such as Iaonnis Bekos' *Euthanasia and Patristic Tradition: Reading St. Damascene & St. Symeon the New Theologian on Christian Bioethics* (2019), or Michael A. Burovitch's *The Stem Cell Epistles: Letters to My Students about Bioethics, Embryos, Stem Cells and Fertility Treatments*. Nevertheless, this brief book will serve as a useful starting point.

Reviewer

Carl P. Olson, Towson University