



Dawne C. McCance, ed. *Life Ethics in World Religions*. University of Manitoba Studies in Religion 3. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998, 178 pages, ISBN 0-7885-0452-5, US \$29.95.

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This is a collection of papers by ten Canadian scholars, six of whom are affiliated with the University of Manitoba. The chapters are linked together by the theme of “life ethics,” which appears to be a new sub-division within the field of ethics. The editor reports that she has received several inquiries as to the meaning of this new designation (p. 3) and in her Introduction explains it as an expanded form of bioethics which is not restricted to Western ethical perspectives but “represent[s] multicultural points of view” (p. 4). She writes:

What the essays have in common is an interest in the ethics of life. The word “bioethics” means literally this, “ethics of life,” and yet the essays assembled here conceive of life ethics as, necessarily, encompassing more than analysis of biomedical problems and possibilities. The term life ethics is retained in the book to allow for this wider scope. The essays extend the range of bioethics to a number of the world’s religious traditions and thus to some very different interpretations of life, and of ethics, than prevail in the contemporary West (p. 4).

Having perused the contents, however, I am still perplexed about the precise nature of this new field. What, precisely, is the “wider scope” that is referred to? Is it the extension of Western bioethics to *other cultures*, or is it the extension of bioethics *itself* as a discipline to embrace new con-

cerns? The confusion arises in part from the fact that the majority of the chapters have nothing to do with bioethics. For the most part they consist of introductory sketches of different world-views or ideologies in which the ethical content is often tenuous. Some of the chapters, for example the two on Buddhism, narrate the life stories of famous members of the tradition. These authors apparently understand “life ethics” as a form of biography that explores how far the lives of the protagonists reflected the ethical norms they espoused. Unfortunately, neither chapter pauses to clarify the meaning of “life ethics” or explain how its subject is relevant to this theme.

The terminological confusion in the title appears to be the result of trying to find a label for what is essentially a very disparate collection of papers. The only obvious common element is that these present “alternative” perspectives in the sense that they are either non-Western or challenge accepted Western canons. Reflecting topical trends, the chapters feature topics such as feminism, gender, the goddess, and aboriginal philosophies alongside discussion of ethics in world religions. In keeping with this apparent distaste for orthodoxy, David G. Creamer’s discussion of Catholic teachings on contraception (which, by the way, is the best chapter in the book) focuses on the *dissenting* Jesuit philosopher, Bernard Lonergan.

Returning to the two chapters dealing with Buddhist ethics, chapter three by Eva K. Neumaier discusses “Buddhists within the moral space of non-duality.” This is an intriguing title hinting at one of the core philosophical problems in Buddhist ethics, namely whether moral teachings are undermined by philosophical doctrines such as emptiness. However, it is an ambitious subject to deal with in only nine pages of text, and the discussion never really addresses the question directly. Instead the bulk of the chapter is devoted to brief summaries of the “exemplary lives” of Ashoka, Lungshar (a Tibetan aristocrat serving under the thirteenth Dalai Lama), Milarepa, Ambedkar, and Thich Nhat Hanh. There is no explanation of why these particular individuals are chosen, but after a brief review the chapter concludes that “In the non-dual activism of Thich Nhat Hanh, Buddhist ethics finds its purest articulation” (p. 50).

In the editor’s opinion, this chapter “provides a good basis for classroom discussion of the Buddhist tradition,” (p. 5) but I wonder whether a selection of biographical notes is really an adequate introduction to Buddhist ethics. Although this discussion is prefaced by a very brief (one page) account of “Normative Ethics” it is not substantial enough to be useful. It also lists the Five Precepts incorrectly (the fifth is abstention from alcohol, not from “slandorous or hurtful talk”). Furthermore, the view expressed at the start of this section (p.42) that “systematic discussions of the Buddhist doctrine” did not appear until four to five hundred years after the Buddha’s

discourses were put into writing, surely needs qualification in view of the much earlier existence of Abhidhamma texts and documents like the *Kathāvatthu*.

Chapter five by Albert Welter is entitled “Life, Death and Enlightenment: Buddhist ethics in a Chinese context.” After a preliminary discussion of the interaction of Confucianism and Buddhism in China, this chapter provides a biography of Yung-ming Yen-shou (904–975), a military official raised under Confucian values who later converted to Buddhism. While the story of Yen-shou’s life is certainly interesting, the chapter in general has more to do with history than ethics. There is an interesting section which mentions Yen-shou’s views on self-immolation, but it is not long enough to give serious attention to the ethical issues this question raises.

Overall, this is a disappointing volume. Its focus is unclear and the contributors seem to have different understandings of what “life ethics” is all about and who they are writing for. There are also inconsistencies on the production side. The first chapter on Buddhism does not use diacritics, while the second chapter and the one on Hinduism do. Lamentably, there are frequent errors in both of the latter. There are also grotesque-looking mismatches of fonts and typefaces, notably on page 59. At \$29.95 for a 178-page paperback (the Scholars Press Booknotes leaflet wrongly claims it has 192 pages) this is certainly not value for money. A far better investment at £14.95, and a book that is superior in every way, is *Ethical Issues in Six Religious Traditions*, edited by Peggy Morgan and Clive Lawton (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996).