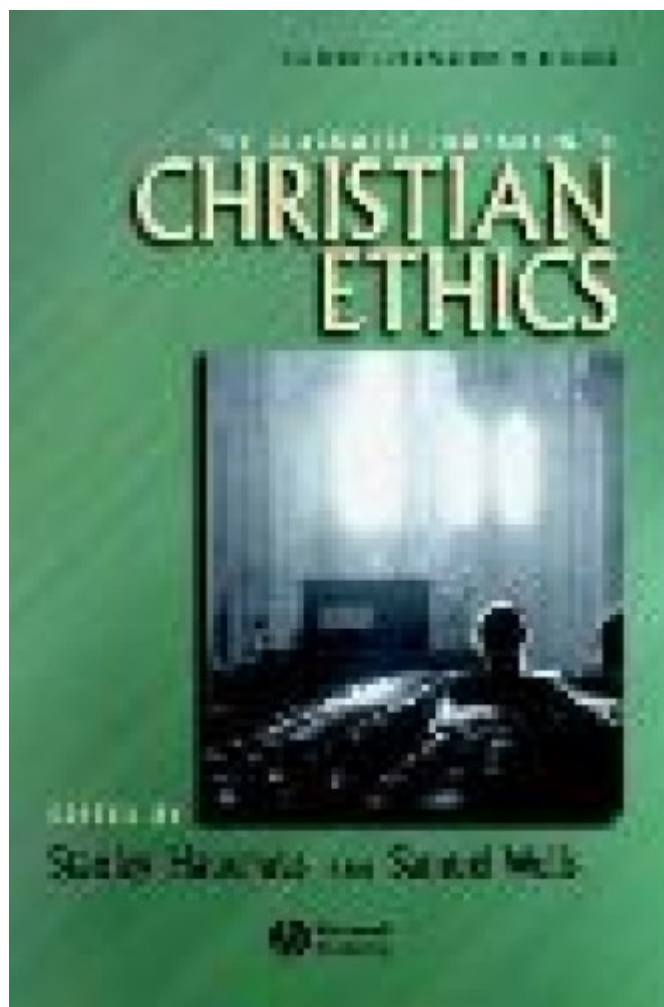


The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics

reviewed by [Allyne Smith](#) in the [August 23, 2005](#) issue

In Review



The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics

Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells
Blackwell

This collection of 36 individual contributions treats numerous moral issues from the perspective of what might be termed liturgical ethics—the view that the Christian moral life ought to be grounded not in philosophical or even theological theories but in the worship life of the church.

Duke University theologian Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells, an Anglican priest who is dean of the chapel at Duke, coauthor the first four chapters, which provide the rationale for the volume's approach. These are followed by discussions of the usual topics, such as abortion, euthanasia and suicide, war and peace, health care and cloning, friendship and homosexuality, ecology, liberation, poverty, politics and reconciliation, punishment, and the use of scripture and tradition.

Some less usual subjects are covered as well, including parenting the mentally disabled, beauty and the arts, property and theft, and genetic modification of foods. Given the central importance of baptism and the Eucharist across the various Christian traditions, it comes as no surprise that these two sacraments receive the most attention, but the other sacraments are included as well.

In a volume with 36 contributors, one might reasonably expect there to be at least one contribution representing the second-largest body of Christians in the world—the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox churches, particularly since the doxological approach to theology is characteristically Eastern and not Western. But there are none, and the only direct discussion of the Orthodox moral tradition is in the afterword by Rowan Williams, who notes the importance of the ethics of Christos Yannaras and Vigen Guroian. In the rest of the volume, only two Orthodox theologians are mentioned (Dmitru Staniloae once and Alexander Schmemmann twice). Because the denominational commitments of the authors are not identified, it is not clear what other traditions are included or excluded.

Furthermore, the essays are written as if there is one phenomenon called Christian worship that should ground our moral reflection. Christian liturgy, however, is dazzlingly diverse and resists generic description. Quaker silence is not like a Pentecostal service, and neither is like a Coptic celebration of the Eucharist. The heterogeneity of text and ritual point to a corresponding heterogeneity of theology, be it dogmatic, spiritual or moral. Just as there is no such thing as generic Christian worship, there is no such thing as a generic Christian ethic.

There seem to be two alternatives for proponents of liturgical ethics. They may proceed by comparing the myriad traditions of Christian worship, determining the lowest common denominator among them, and then attempting to ground ethics upon the desiccated remains. Or they could take a more promising route: moral theologians could write out of their own specific traditions. The resulting descriptions would be far richer and more interesting, and they would be likely to yield greater understanding across denominational lines.

A third weakness is the book's disciplinary insularity. All of the contributors appear to be ethicists who are using worship as a source for their moral reflection. The volume might have been stronger if half of the authors had been liturgical theologians doing ethics. Moreover, the contributors neither engage nor mention the work that has been done over the years by liturgical theologians doing liturgical ethics. I am thinking here of scholars such as Don Saliers and Bruce Morrill.

Despite these criticisms, *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics* is the most substantial volume yet produced in service of the idea that Christian ethics should be grounded in the church's liturgy. It provides the reader with thoughtful essays addressing many of the moral issues of our day and makes a persuasive case for the notion that how we worship God ought to shape how we live.