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Michael Banner does not mince words. Moral theology is odd; moral philosophy is odder; and bioethics, depending on the page to which one turns, is limited, irrelevant and/or uncomprehending. These claims alone recommend *The Ethics of Everyday Life* both to those who might find them surprising, as well as to those whose work joins Professor Banner’s much-needed project: that of re-envisioning and reconfiguring moral theology.

Dean, Fellow and Director of Studies in Theology and Religious Studies at Trinity College, Cambridge, Banner takes moral theology (or Christian ethics) to task for its failure to engage the pervasively ethical realities of ordinary, everyday life. The malformation of our discipline by its historical confessional contexts, its misguided focus on controversies, quandaries and dilemmas, and its preference for moral philosophy and bioethics as dialogue partners have blinded moral theology to the nuances and textures of the broader cultural contexts that powerfully shape the lives of ordinary people. Unable to see, capture or theorize these realities, he argues, moral theology fails to be therapeutic, evangelical, or in any way pastorally useful. If it is to achieve these purposes, he believes, it must find a way to address ‘other ethical imaginaries and forms of life’, attending ‘to the psychological and sociocultural depth of the different forms of life which we encounter’ (p. 23). To do this, he argues, moral theology must turn to a new dialogue partner: social anthropology.

*The Ethics of Everyday Life* displays, in eight chapters, what such a dialogue might look like. The first chapter is methodological prolegomena. In addition to laying out the challenge articulated above, Banner begins by framing the project theologically, structuring his choice of topics around the creedal moments of Christ’s human life—his conception, birth, suffering, death and burial. Here, the Gospels proclaim, Christ entered into universal dimensions of human experience, dimensions that have often functioned culturally and ethically as ‘sites of contention and controversy’ (p. 2). Christ’s in-dwelling of these moments enables ‘the Christian imagination of human life’ to come into conversation with ‘other moral imaginaries of the human’ (p. 3). How, he asks, do these moments of Christ’s life—mediated to us through Scripture, tradition, material culture and...
practices—represent human life, and how do they relate to contemporary cultural framings of such moments, framings clarified for us by social anthropology? (p. 36).

Each of the remaining chapters takes up a traditional topic or issue, primarily though not exclusively a topic in bioethics, and demonstrates how this approach reorients what have become tired and predictable analyses, opening them up in fresh and generative ways. For example, in chapter 2, he turns to the first creedal locus—conception. Under this heading, he attends to the controversy surrounding reproductive technologies. Rather than allowing the topic to be defined by the usual bioethical questions of how embryos are created and their moral status, he complicates those by focusing on the notion of kinship. Drawing on a series of recent anthropological studies of assisted reproductive technologies in conversation with more traditional works like those of Malinowski, he demonstrates how even amidst the putative complications of kinship created by assisted reproduction, the consumption of these technologies remains largely driven by traditional notions of biological kinship. The socially-produced ‘desperateness of childlessness’ that surrounds reproductive technologies remains fuelled by a relentless quest of ‘chasing the blood tie’ (p. 50). This textured account of the practices and experiences of reproductive technologies is brought into conversation with the subversion of biological kinship in the Christian tradition. Primarily via Augustine, he demonstrates how the issue of kinship is complicated from the earliest moments of the Christian tradition, which has repeatedly reimaged and reconfigured kinship away from biological or natural kinship to spiritual kinship in complex ways. This Christian imaginary, embodied in Christian practices surrounding Baptism, provides a therapeutic alternative to Christians—both childless and childbearing—caught in cultural constructions of desperation. As he notes, ‘Christian rites intend to unkin us, only to rekin us with new bonds that dispel childlessness as much as they eliminate orphanhood’ (p. 59).

Subsequent chapters follow this pattern, examining particular contemporary questions under the relevant creedal loci. Chapter 3—under the heading of Christ’s birth—continues the conversation on kinship from chapter 2, exploring contemporary social constructions of children and their theological reimaginings. Chapter 4 looks at the contemporary politics of compassion and humanitarianism through the Christian tradition’s developing engagement with Christ’s suffering. Chapter 5—probably the most powerful chapter in the book—problematizes the ways in which contemporary culture imagines the end-of-life—caught between the binary scripts of euthanasia / physician-assisted suicide on the one hand and hospice on the other. Banner demonstrates how these foci omit most of the experience of the end-of-life—at least that of real people and their families, namely, the slow dwindling of aging, capped for many by dementia and Alzheimer’s. Chapter 6, on burial, examines the deeply problematic Alder Hey case, which involved the removal, retention and disposal of organs and tissues following post-mortem examination without the knowledge or consent of the parents of the deceased children, exploring anthropological and Christian notions of embodiment. Chapter 7 takes up the practice of memory.

Stanley Hauerwas has said, ‘we can only act in a world that we can see’. The great strengths of this book are the ways in which Banner engages social anthropology as a tool to enable the Christian community to see traditional questions in new ways and to reconfigure how they are framed, thereby opening up important new dimensions for analysis, engagement and action. Social anthropology, he argues, ‘gives an account of
how people live which is “at once psychologically and socioculturally realistic” (p. 24, quoting J. Robbins, ‘Where in the World are Values? Exemplarity, Morality and Social Process’, forthcoming). Thus, throughout the book, he recruits compelling anthropological and ethnographic studies of reproductive technologies, birth, the history of children, humanitarianism, social abandonment, retirement homes, dementia, contemporary research ethics, Greek death rituals, cemeteries, liturgical practice in a Greek Orthodox village, and more, in order to detail the textured materiality and lived dynamics of the issues engaged. These studies refreshingly illuminate aspects of reality previously invisible to and obscured by the lenses of philosophy and bioethics.

Banner further reorients the traditional way of framing contemporary questions by turning to the theological tradition. Each chapter provides a deep engagement with a spectrum of historical figures, texts, and aspects of material culture that challenges or upends contemporary cultural assumptions often blithely adopted within contemporary Christian discourse. In addition to Augustine’s reconfiguring of Christian kinship mentioned above, he draws upon practices such as godparenting, the Churching of Women after childbirth, the development of iconography of Christ vis-à-vis his suffering, the liturgies of the *ars moriendi*, Augustine’s reflections on the death and burial of Monica, the *Mérode Alterpiece*, and (again) more. This mosaic of glimpses into the tradition provides an array of alternative Christian imaginaries critical for moral theology’s therapeutic task.

Let me close with three comments or questions. The first is simply a quibble. While one might appreciate the recent redemption of Augustine within moral theology (*contra* John Mahoney and others), one finds here a heavy dose of Augustine. A broader array of voices from the theological tradition would help to flesh out the Christian imaginary in important ways.

Second, the chapters in this book were initially delivered as the Bampton Lectures at the University of Oxford in 2013. As a result, each chapter serves as more of an introduction to how traditional questions might be approached differently. Each reflection could—and should—be expanded into a stand-alone monograph. This would allow even deeper engagement with the nuances of ‘the ordinary’ relevant to each topic. It would also make space for a more detailed constructive proposal about possible reimagined ecclesial practices in the contemporary context. Banner gestures to such practices at the end of each chapter, but these gestures remain largely suggestive rather than fully fleshed out. How, for example, might the baptismal rites’ foregrounding of godparents actually play out in lived experience in a contemporary congregation? How might the Eucharist actually reconfigure communal practices with the elderly in our congregations—what would that look like? Where are the narratives of actual congregations who are embodying these new Christian imaginaries of kinship and so on, in concrete spaces and places in our contemporary world—or what would it take to incarnate alternative imaginaries here and now? As he notes, ‘What we currently lack and what we need is a coherent and perspicuous account of the practice of the Christian life, which would, in a space of cultural contestation, describe and sustain this form of life as a particular way of being human in the world … in conscious and therapeutic dialogue with other accounts’ (p. 28). More work is needed to develop such a coherent and perspicuous account.

Third, while I affirm the turn to social anthropology, we must remain cognizant that it was modernity’s anthropological turn to the subject, so celebrated within contemporary systematic and moral theology, that marked the beginning of the demise of
moral theology. Granted, the anthropology engaged by our predecessors was primarily philosophical, which Banner rightly critiques. Yet, following the Second Vatican Council, many moral theologians similarly turned away from philosophical interlocutors, privileging the discourse of a new dialogue partner, that of psychology. Psychology became the new locus of truth about the human to which moral theology needed to adapt and respond. Catholic moral theology has yet to recover from this move.

While Banner’s work does not make the findings of any particular anthropological study normative, methodological questions remain to be explored. Does the choice to frame this study around the ‘human’ moments of Christ’s life—however creedal they might be—affirm an anthropological starting point for moral theology? How ought moral theology engage social anthropology? Is the latter primarily descriptive or diagnostic, simply providing a realistic narrative that demonstrates the cultural contours in which the contemporary church finds itself, or diagnosing factors, problems or confusions that need a pastoral response? Or is it more normative—does it give us truth which moral theology must necessarily incorporate? How does it conceptualize religion or faith, in, for example, studies of burial or liturgical practices? What is encompassed under this umbrella of social anthropology—studies by self-identified anthropologists or materials from other loci that equally might provide a window into the everyday, such as art, economic analyses, literature and so on? And what, then, is the interface between the imaginaries captured in these studies and the imaginaries generated by Christian history, tradition or practices?

These questions are by no means critiques of The Ethics of Everyday Life. Rather, Banner joins a number of younger moral theologians who have been engaged in this work of reorienting moral theology vis-à-vis social anthropology and material culture for the past twenty to thirty years, especially in the US context. The power and generativity of this shift—named so well by Banner—now calls for a more explicit articulation of the methodological issues in this relationship, in order to advance this important project of making moral theology—once again—therapeutic and evangelical.

Brian Brock (ed. Kenneth Oakes), Captive to Christ, Open to the World: On Doing Christian Ethics in Public

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We are rarely given insight into the thought processes and working methods that underpin academic work, or afforded the opportunity to meet the writer behind the text. Yet it is consistent with Brian Brock’s robust insistence on restoring the connections between the history of doctrine and theological ethics and practical issues of Christian discipleship that he should be prepared to write himself back onto the page. In eight previously published interviews with three conversation partners, Brock reveals something of the various political and cultural issues that have spurred his work, as well as some of his primary intellectual influences. The reader learns something about Brock’s own biography and, in the process, garners observations about theological method and its potential