BOOK REVIEW

Medicine, Society, and Faith in the Ancient and Medieval Worlds. BY DARREL W. AMUNDSEN. Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Bioethics is still a very young discipline. It has yet to locate itself historically and philosophically relative to other sources of morality, particularly religion. Indeed, as it has developed in this country, bioethics has been largely a secular undertaking. It has aimed at an autonomous ethics free of all religious and metaphysical influences. As a result, the past relations of ethics and medicine to religion, particularly Christianity, have been neglected and even seriously misconstrued.

In this volume, Darrel Amundsen begins to set this record straight by examining the interactions between medicine, ethics, and religion in the ancient, patristic, and medieval eras. In eleven essays, two of them previously unpublished, the author compares and contrasts the attitudes of Christianity to those of medicine in each era. Together, these essays provide a convincing counterview to the oversimplification and misunderstandings promulgated in the scholarly literature of the last several decades.

Amundsen covers a wide range of topics, e.g., care of the dying and incurable patient, attitudes toward suicide, the duties of the physician in plague times, the care of defective children, the practice of medicine by the clergy, and the medical and societal responses to syphilis and AIDS. In each case, the author, whose background is in classical philology, offers a close textual analysis of both primary and secondary sources. Each chapter is carefully documented and annotated. Amundsen makes a clear and well-argued case against misunderstanding in recent scholarship on these issues.

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In his first chapter, Amundsen unifies the broad range of topics around two major themes: (1) the boundaries between religion and medicine and the way they have changed in each era; and (2) the emergence in the Christian era of the principle of respect for human life and its sanctity as exemplified in Christian medical ethics. The complexity and the ambiguities that have marked the relation between medicine and Christianity are set forth in a way that belies the erroneous and simplistic presuppositions of contemporary scholarship.

Among the misconceptions that Amundsen clarifies are these: that medicine and the Christian religion were hostile rivals competing to treat the sick in contradictory ways; that Christianity tolerated suicide by its disdain for earthly existence, that it fostered medical abandonment of the incurably ill, that AIDS is compared to the plague (when in reality he believes syphilis is the more likely analogy); that treatises on medical ethics did not exist before the 18th century; that Christianity and the Hippocratic tradition were in opposition to each other, etc. These are all bag and baggage of bioethicists and historians who lack Amundsen's familiarity with original sources.

Amundsen points out how uninformed contemporary commentators have been on the fundamentals of the Judeo-Christian traditions and beliefs about medicine, healing, and caring for the sick. Any serious scholar interested in a coherent and comprehensive account of the past out of which bioethics emerged, and from which it now diverges, should study this volume. However one may feel about the place of religion in contemporary bioethics, there is much to be learned from Amundsen's carefully crafted essays. His work should help to restore the "soul" to bioethics, which Meilaender suggests was lost when bioethics abandoned religion, metaphysics, and its engagement with the "deeper" question of our humanity on which substantive ethics ultimately rests.¹—EDMUND D. PELLEGRINO, MD, MACP, Center for Clinical Bioethics, Georgetown University Medical Center, Washington, DC.

REFERENCE

1. Meilaender GC. *Body, Soul and Bioethics*. South Bend, Ind: University of Notre Dame Press; 1995.