On the Contributions to Theological Scholarship of William C. Spohn (1944-2005)

On the Contributions to Theological Scholarship of William C. Spohn

4 Follow the Friendships: The Work of William Spohn
BY MARTHA E. STORTZ "Bill did not work or think or pray in isolation," writes Stortz in her introduction to this issue. "Each of these scholar-friends contributed—and contributed greatly—to the many and various conversations that informed Bill’s work."

10 Hearers and Doers of the Word: The Challenge of William C. Spohn to Scripture and Ethics
BY JOHN R. DONAHUE, S.J. Donahue depicts Spohn as an embodiment of the call of the Second Vatican Council that moral theology must be renewed by engagement with Scripture and that Scripture is the soul of theology.

14 Jesus and the Moral Life: Edwards, H. R. Niebuhr, and Spohn
BY ANNE E. PATRICK, SNJM Patrick explores ways that Niebuhr and Edwards influenced Spohn’s views on several topics, including Jesus and the moral life.

18 William C. Spohn’s Contribution to Moral Theology
BY JAMES T. BRETZKE, S.J. Bretzke weaves together Spohn’s contribution not only as author in the discipline of moral theology but also his wider impact as teacher, ecumenist, mentor, and friend.

23 Where Do We Go From Here? Ways We Can Build on Spohn’s Contributions
BY RICHARD M. GULA, S.S. As he explores Spohn’s legacy and how we can expand on it, Gula highlights two themes: the role of the imagination in the moral life, and the convergence of morality and spirituality.

BANNNAN GRANT REPORT

26 Shakespeare at San Quentin: Santa Clara Students Perform Shakespeare For and With Inmates
BY ALDO BILLINGSLEA When a group of SCU students collaborated with San Quentin inmates to explore the art of Shakespeare, both groups came away profoundly moved.

31 Spohn Memorial Fund and Next Issue
William C. Spohn's Contribution to Moral Theology

By James T. Bretzke, S.J.
Professor and Co-chair, Department of Theology and Religious Studies, University of San Francisco; author of A Morally Complex World: Engaging Contemporary Moral Theology.

Verba volant, scripta manent ("Spoken words fly away, written words remain.") is usually an exhortation to commit one's teachings to paper. Perhaps the Latin equivalent of "publish or perish"? And on occasions such as this volume dedicated to the work of our beloved colleague Bill Spohn, the genre usually calls for the accent to fall on the individual's published corpus as the focus for his contribution to the discipline. While I intend to honor this tradition, I would like to point out that the verba volant do not in fact disappear, and in the age of globalization, Bill's unpublished contributions constitute an important part of his legacy to moral theology. To this end I would like to weave together Bill's contribution not only as author in the discipline of moral theology but also his wider impact as teacher, ecumenist, mentor, and friend.

It was as one of the absolute best all-time teachers I'd had (next to another former teacher who also contributed to this volume) that I first came to know Bill in 1981 at the Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley. Those of us who were taught by Bill remember a number of oft-repeated phrases that he would employ as mnemonic aids, such as "History doesn't repeat itself, but it does rhyme." Looking over some of my course notes in conjunction with reviewing some of Bill's key writings I did find a number of compelling thematic rhymes which run throughout both his teaching and publishing.

One of these which I judge to be perhaps Bill's central contribution to Roman Catholic moral theology is his emphasis on Jesus and the Gospels not merely as sources for moral norms but as change agents in the lives of the disciples. I remember Bill often remarking about a typical German manual of moral theology which
would not mention Jesus until about page 200, and then only in a footnote. It may have been a slight exaggeration, but only slight. Certainly Bill took seriously Vatican II’s call to make Scripture the soul of all theology, and especially to reform the approach to moral theology.²

While others obviously tried to take seriously this same Conciliar charge, none has done more than Bill, in my opinion, to let Jesus and the Gospels structure the blueprint and framework for approaching moral theology, rather than building the ethical project on a different foundation and then turning to Jesus and Scripture when it was time to move to the stage of interior decoration of the moral dwelling. “Rhyming” with St. Paul a bit, Bill used to say, “It’s hard to die for a ‘moral norm,’ but we might imagine doing this for Jesus or another.” What Bill was pointing at was the absolute essentialness for reconnecting a Gospel-centered spirituality to the practice of moral discernment as foundational for doing moral theology:

_Spirituality_ here means the practical, affective, and transformative dimension of a religious tradition. It is accountable to the norms and convictions of a faith community. The practices that express spirituality are pedagogical and transformational. They are the basic repertory for an engaged reading of the story of Jesus.³

If we follow Bill’s lead here, then the task of moral theology points less toward making correct decisions and more to the whole process of conversion.⁴

Doing moral theology with this goal in mind meant that many of the founts of Roman Catholic tradition would not provide us with the resources we needed. What Bill did then, and which I would also count as a major part of his legacy to the whole discipline of moral theology, was to turn to other thinkers and traditions. In this, Bill showed himself to be a master ecumenist, and speaking as one who has both studied and taught for considerable periods of time outside of the United States, I have relied immensely on Bill’s ecumenical approach to moral theology in doing my own work. Now I realize that in this regard I am probably preaching to the choir, but names like Jonathan Edwards, H. Richard Niebuhr, and James Gustafson would not have enjoyed the recognition or cautious acceptance among the seminarians and scholars in Rome, Asia and Africa if it had not been for Bill. Bill never discounted Thomas Aquinas and the classic natural law theory, but neither did he confine himself or us to these sources.

For my own work in moral theology I am particularly indebted to Bill for introducing us to James Gustafson’s own appropriation of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral of Scripture, Tradition, Experience and Reason (which I have renamed the “Normatively Human”). This four-sector source grid has now become so well established in the English-speaking world that I even find traces of it appearing in certain Vatican documents!

Besides modeling for us an ecumenical and collaborative approach to Christian ethics, Bill also broke important ground in trying to outline what I would like to call an inculturated American moral theology. That famous gentle homily “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God”
was probably all that most of us knew about Jonathan Edwards’ work prior to making Bill’s academic acquaintance. I know that Anne Patrick details this contribution in her article in this volume, but in terms of Bill’s overall contribution to moral theology I would underscore how he showed us we didn’t always have to look to either the distant past or a remote Europe for doing Christian ethics.5

Another important area that Bill helped us explore as a rich source for Christian moral living was what Edwards called the “religious affections” and the “reasons of the heart.” Using the work of a 17th century Protestant divine for the contemporary appropriation of the emotions in Christian ethics, I believe was a master-stroke on Bill’s part—somewhat like the way that Josef Fuchs would cite Thomas Aquinas when he wanted to introduce a particularly novel interpretation on moral absolutes. If Bill had merely used a contemporary author (and I’ll not name names to protect the guilty) to make this important point I think the notion could have been more easily dismissed, especially by those influenced by the patres graviores working in the shadow of

the Dome.6 While Bill was respectful generally of the Magisterium, he did not hesitate, with a genuine obsequium religiosum7 (usually!) to indicate instances in which he felt the Magisterium itself was not being as faithful as it could be in attending to the development of moral theology.8

What does one do, though, when one gets better in touch with one’s emotions—moral or otherwise? The answer that Bill gave us marks the next important contribution to moral theology, namely the importance of the role of discernment in the moral life and how we can engage better in this crucial process. He published a number of works in this area, and time does not permit me to go into greater detail here on this contribution.9 However, in the whole discernment process he did help navigate between a biblical fundamentalism associated with WWJD10 on one hand, while steering clear of a somewhat cynical dismissiveness of those who would turn to the Bible for moral guidance. Spohn’s approach was his articulation of Jesus as a “concrete universal” which we can access and appropriate through the use of David Tracy’s concept of analogical imagination.

One of Bill’s favorite sayings was that the moral mandate of the foot washing in John 13 was “not about pedicures!” He challenged us always to be not “clones of Christ,” but truly ourselves—that is, unique and individual, but nevertheless members bound together to the Lord in the community of disciples. Here I realize I’m beginning to read in the garden plot assigned to my esteemed colleague Fr. John Donahue, so I will say no more at this moment, other than to acknowledge that another real contribution Bill made to the discipline of moral theology was to model for us how a good moral theologian has to be cross-disciplinary and try to bring in the best insights from Scripture and the rest of theology, as well as anything else which would help illuminate one or the other sectors of moral experience.

As you have probably intuited by now, Bill’s accent in doing moral theology falls far less on the “what” of moral theology, e.g., deducing the
One of Bill’s favorite sayings was that the moral mandate of the foot washing in John 13 was “not about pedicures!” He challenged us always to be not “clones of Christ,” but truly ourselves—that is, unique and individual, but nevertheless members bound together to the Lord in the community of disciples.

Various levels of abstract moral norms or applying them to concrete ethical quandaries through casuistry than it does on the “who” of morality, namely the individuals and the communities they live in in our morally complex world (to sneak in the title of a book near to my heart¹). Thus, the last contribution of Bill’s that time allows me to make here would be his thicker description of our moral identity. Here again, those of us familiar with Bill’s work spot another few rhymes.

In Go and Do Likewise Bill helped clarify the notion of personal identity by asking and answering the question “To whom do I belong?” I think Bill would say that getting the right question was not only antecedent to, but methodologically more important, than getting the right answer: “The right question is not ‘Who am I?’ but ‘Whose am I? To whom do I belong? To what am I committed?’ Personal continuity is determined by the persons and causes to which we have committed ourselves, and the persons who have promised themselves to us. Identity comes from identification with specific people and causes.”¹²

Here Bill was echoing something he’d outlined 15 years earlier in an excellent monograph entitled “St. Paul on Apostolic Celibacy and the Body of Christ.” In it, Bill gave what I still find to be one of the most compelling treatments of the promise of chastity priests and religious take, basing it not so much on traditional asceticism, but on a lived commitment of the God-given gift of one’s whole sexual identity. Thus, despite the title, Bill really has given us a positive theology of sexuality for all states of life, and he stressed that a lived expression of sexual identity for all should be first and foremost relationally oriented. Thus, no one, including those of us living out vowed celibacy, is dispensed from the life-long and life-giving striving to form bonds of intimate companionship: “We learn to acknowledge our personal worth through the love [others] have for us, receiving their gifts as they have received ours .... The celibate must be able to name specific people when the question is asked, “To whom do I belong?”¹³

Certainly most, if not all, of us who attended the panel on Spohn at the CTSA 2006 Convention did so because we realize that along with Marty, we too belong to Bill as he does to us. The testimony of his illness and death is not yet on library shelves, but they are powerful words which have literally flown around the world and likewise constitute an important part of Bill’s legacy to moral theology. In going over my class notes for a 1985 course on moral discernment I had with him, I found the following which might serve as a fitting valediction from Bill to us who remain behind: “God’s answer to theodicy was not a theoretical one, but rather a practical one—Jesus. Thus perhaps there is no apt theoretical answer to the question of theodicy—but only God’s practical answer.”¹⁴ Here Bill and Marty both have given us a humbling and inspiring glimpse into God’s practical answer to the problem of why good people suffer.

For my own conclusion, in the spirit of Bill’s narrative approach to theology, I’d like to
relate a brief encounter I had when I first began teaching a course on the *proprum* or distinctiveness of Christian ethics in 1990 at the Pontifical Gregorian University. I had listed as one of the core texts Bill's WATSA book on Scripture and ethics and one of my erstwhile teachers and new chair, an eminent German moralist, was somewhat troubled by my approach and asked me if Spohn's book were really suitably *valida* for an STL course in fundamental moral theology at such an illustrious institution as the Greg. The response I gave him then remains my firm conviction today, not only for this one excellent book, but for the whole of the corpus of Bill's contributions to moral theology as author, teacher, mentor, and friend: *Si Padre, è molto valida. E così sia.*

ENDNOTES

1. I'm sure a full bibliography of Spohn's works will be published soon, but have counted thirteen page entries included in my A Research Bibliography on Christian Ethics and Catholic Moral Theology (Lewiston N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 2006), and a further seven page entries in my Bibliography on Scripture and Christian Ethics (Studies in Religion and Society) (Lewiston N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 1997). Both of these books give brief annotations to the publications listed, so this might be of help to someone wishing to look at the works discussed here below (as well as those which could not be included in such a brief presentation).


6. “In the shadow of the Dome” refers to St. Peter's in the Vatican and indicates a mode of thought either closely aligned to (or done in fear of a negative reaction from) the Magisterium.

7. Cf. *Opusum novum*, #27, and there is a wealth of commentary on what this does and does not mean.

8. See, for example, his critique of the first draft of the Universal Catechism's overall approach to moral theology, "The Moral Vision of the Catechism: Thirty Years That Did Not Happen," *America 162* (3 March 1990): 189-192. This article with its reference to a Vatican Rip Van Winkle is the source of a very amusing anecdote which connects Bill to Pope Benedict XVI.

9. See also his "Pascha and Principles," *Theological Studies 52* (1991): 69-87, which Spohn published as part of the "Notes in Moral Theology: 1990." He reviews and discusses recent moral literature that stresses aspects of the emotions and their involvement in morality. Two key concepts used in reference to the emotions are the criterion of "appropriateness" for moral assessments and strategies and the "education" of the emotions, and he provides ample reference to related literature on psychology and morality.

10. "What Would Jesus Do?" In my opinion Spohn discusses this problematic approach to Scripture and ethics best in the first edition of his *What Are They Saying About Scripture and Ethics?* (Ramsey: Paulist Press, 1984), especially in Chapter 5, "Call to Discipleship," where he references his discussion to Charles Sheldon's devotional classic of the late 19th century, *In His Steps*.


