

preferable to the delusion that there is enough agreement about values to sustain something like Oldham groups, or to derive middle axioms. Dialogic traditionalism is essentially a modest update of the British social ethics or social theology tradition.

Despite the prominence of Alasdair MacIntyre in Brown's argument (chapter 3 is an exposition of his ideas, and there is much commentary elsewhere), I struggled with the role he plays. Much is made of MacIntyre's notion of an epistemological crisis and parallels drawn between crises of traditions and the current problems of church bodies engaging with economic issues. I am not sure that these bodies are traditions in MacIntyre's sense or that anything is gained by the comparison. In my view, these bodies are in crisis, full stop. Another parallel is between the middle way MacIntyre supposedly offers between liberalism and communitarianism and the middle way Brown offers with his dialogic traditionalism. Surely he is offering a middle way, full stop—the comparison with MacIntyre adds little. Other aspects of MacIntyre's thought seem to undercut Brown's argument. Brown's search for "fragments" (223) and "limited substantive agreement about ends" (228) seems exactly the sort of moral project MacIntyre objects to in *After Virtue*. MacIntyre demands larger coherent stories and ultimate ends.

The strengths of the book are its largely correct diagnosis of the problem of church organizations' commenting on economic issues, the link to wider debates over liberalism, and the emphasis on practical implications of the ideas for church organizations. I have reservations about Brown's use of MacIntyre and am unconvinced that dialogic traditionalism offers any new way forward. Rather than new models for church organizations commenting on economic issues, perhaps we need completely different structures for fruitful engagement between economics and theology.

—Paul Oslington

*University of New South Wales/  
Australian Defence Force Academy, Canberra*

## Doing Christian Ethics from the Margins

**Miguel A. De La Torre**

Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2004 (280 pages)

This textbook, intended especially for the college classroom, "seeks to open Christian ethics to the rich diversity found among those who are usually excluded." From the beginning, the author exudes passion for those left out. De La Torre is correct, at least in my experience, that many of our students (indeed—most of us) are blind to the least among us. He sees his task, both as a teacher and as a writer, as raising our consciousness about those on the margins. Further, his goal is not simply to change the way his students and readers think, but also to bring about a new way of life.

I find myself in deep agreement with De La Torre on these goals, and I was initially impressed by the passion and zeal that he brings to these purposes. My hopes turned rather quickly to dissatisfaction as he unfolded his means to accomplish those worthwhile goals.

In order to carry out its task, the book is divided into two main parts.

The first part includes three chapters of ethical theory. De La Torre makes it clear early on that he understands himself to be a Christian liberation theologian, and these three chapters are an effort to present his understanding of liberation theology. In a style that is accessible to most college sophomores, De La Torre turns liberation theology into a five-step formula.

1. *Observe* the situation by calling into question the dominant interpretation and “using the eyes of the marginalized” by “seeing from below.” De La Torre wants to emphasize the “forgotten history” that purportedly led to the current oppression.
2. *Reflect* on the way that the current social structures oppress those on the margins.
3. *Pray*, or at least think, about the issue in a theological context.
4. *Act*. The author writes, “This action can attempt to meet such basic human needs as feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and visiting the imprisoned; or, on the other hand, such action can attempt to change the actual social structures responsible for causing hunger, nakedness, imprisonment.”
5. *Reassess* the situation in light of new information and perspectives because this process is continually unfolding and this is always necessary.

The remainder of the book is an application of this five-step routine to a variety of issues and case studies. There are chapters on global poverty, war, the environment, national poverty, political campaigns, life and death, corporate accountability, affirmative action, and private property. For each of these nine issues, the author follows his first three steps: observing, reflecting, and praying (or thinking theologically about the issue). In order to accomplish his final two steps (action and reassessment) each chapter ends with case studies as well as questions to provoke further thought.

The book falls short of its goals in both the first and second parts. The first part is flawed in that it does not do enough to provide students with any meaningful way to understand those who are on the margins as human persons created in the image and likeness of God. De La Torre draws heavily from Hegel’s master-slave dialectic. According to that account, there is an inevitable tension among human beings. After the standoff, one side dominates while the other side is oppressed. De La Torre assumes that his students and readers are on the side of the dominators, and he wants them to undergo transformation so that they will side with the oppressed.

In its own way, this analysis is oppressive, because it encourages us to view those on the margins impersonally as victims. Throughout the book, De La Torre unwittingly presents those on the margins in highly impersonal terms—as mere problems and not as human persons. He describes them as “wretched,” “losers,” “victims,” “oppressed,”

those who “don’t count,” and so forth. He tries passionately to call attention to those on the margins, but he does not successfully show their capacities and gifts. We are not left with a sense of those on the margins as persons gifted by God with intelligence and freedom and endowed with the capacity to make self-determining choices ordered toward the common good. Although De La Torre seems to want us to see the marginalized with the eyes of Christ, instead we learn to see them with the eyes of nineteenth-century German philosophers.

In a similar way, the issues and case studies are flawed. Scholars committed to the Enlightenment ideals of objectivity and detachment might complain that the presentation of the issues and cases is one-sided. That is true enough; there is no pretense to objectivity. De La Torre makes it pretty plain which side he is on for each issue, and it is always the side that one would expect from a liberation theologian located on the political left. I have a different complaint about the case studies. The cases are so brief (usually only a few paragraphs long) that they make it impossible for college students to understand the issues with any kind of human complexity. In some of the cases, those on the margins are given names to make the cases seem more real, but we do not learn much about the people involved. We never see the people involved as moral agents or as persons created in God’s image. Instead, each one seems like a caricature, a helpless victim—followed by a five-step rational process for how to fix the problem. (Perhaps a violent revolution is justified?) The personal passion, evident at the beginning of the book, quickly transforms into a mechanical analysis of impersonal power relationships.

I have found that my students learn most about marginalized people by serving in their neighborhoods, and then, over time, coming to know them not as the oppressed but as neighbors and maybe as friends. For a better book, I recommend John McKnight’s *The Careless Society*. My sense is that De La Torre’s gifts—as a writer, a teacher, and a theologian—would be developed better with a vision more like McKnight’s.

—Gregory R. Beabout  
*Saint Louis University*

## American Dream: Three Women, Ten Kids, and a Nation’s Drive to End Welfare

**Jason DeParle**

New York: Viking, 2004 (422 pages)

Jason DeParle, senior writer for the *New York Times*, does a remarkable job of personalizing the policymakers who fashioned and the recipients who lived the reality of welfare reform. Drawing from years of urban poverty research, DeParle details the impact of six generations of “the way things are” and the staunch interdependence and resourcefulness of those in poverty.