

5-1-1994

Clergy ethics in a changing society: mapping the terrain

Christopher Lind

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus>

Recommended Citation

Lind, Christopher (1994) "Clergy ethics in a changing society: mapping the terrain," *Consensus*: Vol. 20 : Iss. 1 , Article 20.
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol20/iss1/20>

This Book Reviews is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in Consensus by an authorized editor of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact scholarscommons@wlu.ca.

Clergy Ethics in a Changing Society: Mapping the Terrain

James P. Wind, J. Russell Burck, Paul F. Camenisch, and Dennis P. McCann, editors

Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991

306 pp. \$18.95 paperback

The essays collected in this volume grow out of the deliberations of a Clergy Ethics Working Group based in Chicago. It began meeting in 1983 under the leadership of the Centre for the Study of Ethics in the Professions at Illinois Institute of Technology. In 1986, the group found a new home at Chicago's Park Ridge Center for the Study of Health, Faith and Ethics. All of the papers were first presented to the Working Group and revised in light of the discussion.

The key to the success of the volume lies in the diversity of contributions. This diversity is explained by the subtitle. The task of the group was not to settle the arguments about clergy ethics but rather to "map the terrain" for the purposes of further exploration.

It is appropriate that part of the impetus for this research should come from people concerned with professional ethics. Everywhere today, groups with social status and specialized expertise are having their authority questioned especially when it comes to questions of self-discipline. This is so widespread that when questions about clergy ethics arise, they are framed in the discourse of professional ethics. For example, in the summer of 1992 the General Council of the United Church of Canada called for the establishment of a code of ethics for the clergy. Codes are characteristic of self-disciplining groups and one of the differences between ministers and lawyers is that lawyers are self-disciplining and ministers are not.

Paul Camenisch's article reviews the professional ethics model and identifies four characteristics of a full-fledged profession. Members of a profession have *specialized skills and knowledge*, they enjoy *professional autonomy*; they *pursue a distinctive goal* on behalf of their clients or society; and they are expected to *exhibit an atypical moral commitment* to the well-being of their clients. Camenisch's discussion of the ways ministers correspond and fail to correspond to these characteristics provides a useful starting point for people in the churches who are using the language of the professions in an unreflective manner.

It contrasts sharply with the contribution by Rebecca Chopp. Chopp takes for granted that ministry is a profession because modern Christianity, under the leadership of modern theology, has accepted the world as defined by modernity. Her own perspective is that of liberation theology. From this point of view the professional model represents both the best and the worst of modern Christianity: "... best because it offers standards of excellence and responsibility; worst because it threatens to suffocate ministry with bureaucratic rationality and technical service." Chopp wants a different

mission for the church. For her, the professional model implies that our task is to work primarily for individual needs and bureaucratic organization. The alternative is to transform the church into a community of emancipation.

For Chopp the question is not "is the minister a professional?" but rather "what kind of professional is the minister?" Her vision allows for *the minister as an artist, the minister as a community builder, the minister as a prophet and the minister as a teacher.*

Langdon Gilkey is also concerned with the relationship between our vision of the church and our understanding of ministry. In his case, he appeals for a more considered reflection on our different collective memories. Gilkey reminds us of our different ecclesiologies and the ways their enduring fragments continue to shape us. Following on from the categories of Ernst Troeltsch, Gilkey reviews the models of *church as sacrament, church as word and church as spirit* and the role of the minister that follows from each. Only with these in mind can we begin to understand the confusion we presently face.

Dennis McCann begins with the reality of commercial civilization and the market relations that implies. For him, the first principle of clergy ethics is and ought to be "self-sacrifice" which he understands in Niebuhrian terms. Don Browning joins the critics of Reinhold Niebuhr and self-sacrifice. He calls instead for an ethic of mutuality or "equal-regard" for others as a more faithful rendering of Jesus' love commandment.

In a chapter that should be on the reading list of all seminary presidents, Eleanor Scott Myers presents a case study on the role theological education plays in the professionalization of clergy. While her case study focuses particularly on the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), we can all recognize the similarities with our own denominations. Her argument, clearly stated, is that "... preparation for ministry must be conceived from a sociological base, one rooted in realities of class, race, and gender-structured social relations, including ethical leadership commitments."

There are fourteen chapters in this book and I have only mentioned six of them. Even so, one can see that there are some major features compellingly described on this ethical map. If you want to understand some of the reasons why clergy ethics is a complex subject, this book is an excellent place to start. It would make an excellent starting point for a clergy retreat or a ministerial study group. Other contributors to the book are Martin E. Marty, William F. May, James P. Wind, M.L. Brownsberger, J. Russell Burck, Ann O'Hara Graff, Joseph A. Edelheit and Robert Michael Franklin.

Christopher Lind
St. Andrew's College
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan