
Pro Rege

Volume 20 | Number 1

Article 5

September 1991

Shaping Character: Moral Education in the Christian College (Book Review)

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Recommended Citation

Kroeze, Nicholas V. (1991) "Shaping Character: Moral Education in the Christian College (Book Review)," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 20: No. 1, 38 - 39.
Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol20/iss1/5

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Book Reviews

The Invasion of the Computer Culture: What You Need to Know About the New World We Live In, by Allen Emerson and Cheryl Forbes (Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press) 1989. 189 pages, paperback, \$8.95. Reviewed by Dennis L. De Jong, Assistant Professor of Computer Science.

Allen Emerson and Cheryl Forbes investigate three questions in this book: (1) How does the "computer mentality" view intelligence? (2) How does the computer affect those of us who come in contact with it and use it? (3) What finally distinguishes humans from machines? Emerson and Forbes combine their own observations with the ideas of others, to develop a Christian perspective on these questions.

The authors summarize "computer mentality" as "... a world view inspired by computers and artificial intelligence. It sees intelligence and mind as dynamic streams of data, which it seeks to create or simulate." Allan Turing initiated these ideas in the 1940s when he changed the question from "Can a machine think?" to "Can you tell the difference between the machine's response and the human's?" We now identify the latter question as the Turing Test of artificial intelligence.

Emerson and Forbes discuss artificial intelligence in Chapters 2: "Searching for a Smart Machine," 3: "The Computer and the Brain," and 4: "Creating Intelligence." The computer mentality accepts the possibility of artificial intelligence, because it believes in the symbolic nature of intelligence. Those holding to the computer mentality are motivated by "... a materialistic view of the cosmos." For them, "... hope lies in scientific breakthroughs and technological advances." They think that "by showing that creatures can re-create the most complicated part of creation, they can thereby show that they have no need for God" (55).

Second, *The Invasion of the Computer Culture* reveals how computers can dominate our lives, particularly in the way we talk, think, and interact with

others. For example, the authors describe the work of Sherry Turkle who observed and interviewed 200 children and 200 adults. Turkle found that working with computers and playing video games causes children to think profoundly about life, people, themselves, and God. Children think about the computer in psychological terms, yet most do not believe that computers "think."

Third, Emerson and Forbes examine what finally distinguishes humans from machines. To begin with, the meaning that humans communicate via language is a distinguishing factor. In fact, the authors consider natural language as an important characteristic of God's image bearers. Although machines can "say" words, they do not comprehend them. Even more important, God's image bearers must know evil, because it lies in the human mind and heart.

Allen Emerson and Cheryl Forbes wrote *The Invasion of the Computer Culture* for a general audience, but it also speaks to computer specialists and educators. I found it both timely and powerful. The discussion of the effect of computers on people of all ages made a deep impact on me. Others will find the discussion of artificial intelligence interesting. In this "Computer Age," when we see machines imitating more and more human activities, will there always be a characteristic that allows us to distinguish man from machine? The authors focus on our ability to know evil; I would add that we are God's agents, able to respond to his love and grace.

I recommend this book to readers who wish to know more about the impact of the computer on today's society.

Shaping Character: Moral Education in the Christian College, by Arthur F. Holmes (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans) 1991. 82 pages, paperback, \$7.95. Reviewed by Nicholas V. Kroeze, Vice President for Student Affairs.

The purpose of this book is to affirm the integrality of values and of moral and ethical education in the Christian college. Holmes addresses the issue that moral education must be distinguished from indoctrination and "moralizing that simply inserts moral injunctions at every opportunity" (8). Rather, this aspect

of education must bring students to a higher analytical stage where issues they think through and act upon a firm set of principles.

To show how we should understand moral education, Holmes assesses how the current environment relates to three factors: (1) the present ethical climate,

(2) the different Christian traditions, and (3) the theories of moral development in psychology. He then uses this foundational understanding to show how an individual conscience is formed and how this conscience makes moral decisions. Holmes then concludes with a third point emphasizing the need to develop character to complete moral education.

Initially I thought the author would suggest a specific process or formula by which a college could graduate "morally educated" students. He dissects objectively the elements involved in forming character in making moral decisions. This dissecting suggests a model that might guarantee that an ethical analysis process be followed. But, although this material provides good foundational knowledge and insight, it runs the risk of promoting a programmed approach to values-judgment and ethical analysis that requires the student to adhere to a defined process in order to make "ethically correct" decisions. This approach would be counterproductive as the student would then be judged on how he or she mastered a process rather a principle. Further, one senses that the college might be viewed as a "hospital" for the character-deficient

student. One wonders at what point it might be too late to inculcate moral character and values.

Holmes' writing of this book reflects an individual's documenting his development of thought. In the end, he emphasizes that developing moral character does not result from dos and don'ts but rather from "a pervasive condition of the heart, a question of moral identity" (59). He, therefore warns the Christian college about emphasizing behavioral rules rather than personal responsibility—a warning worthy of further reflection. In this light, he sees the college as responsible for setting goals and direction for the future rather than as a panacea for the present. He regards the college as one step in a process of developing Christian character.

Shaping Character does provide good material to contemplate and as a useful framework for discussion in faculty and administrative groups. It presents a case for the Christian college to make character development more tangible in its environment. In addition, it can help an individual reader integrate the building of Christian character with academic learning.

The Scattered Voice: Christians at Odds in the Public Square by James W. Skillen (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House) 1990. \$9.95. Reviewed by Jasper Lesage, Associate Professor of Economics and Dean of the Social Science Division.

In *The Scattered Voice*, Jim Skillen provides a concise overview of diverse Christian voices in the political arena and challenges Christians to improve their efforts to promote justice. His descriptions of a variety of Christian approaches in political theory constitute the major part of the book and are significant in themselves. Just as important, Skillen's own framework creates a reference point for his descriptions of the various views and invites readers to move toward an active political agenda which promotes justice in a consistent, coherent, and biblical fashion.

After setting the stage, Skillen structures the book as a description and discussion of the formal and informal position of several Christian groups on the nature of Christian political activity. He organized the narrative on a traditional "most conservative to most radical" continuum, beginning with pro-American conservatives and placing theonomic reconstructionists, the most radical group, at the end of the continuum. Most readers will find the narrative very readable and informative. One drawback of the book's organization is its concession to the predominant conservative-radical framework, thus reducing the impact of Skillen's own approach, which tries to break from the traditional categories. Given Skillen's pur-

pose of encouraging debate, however, it appears to be a concession worth making to strengthen the book's impact on the Christian community.

Skillen has a more significant agenda than mere description, however. *The Scattered Voice* is a very practical book. It asks various Christian political groupings to justify their political philosophies in the light of the gospel interpreted in its original context and in the light of a modern differentiated society. No political theory passes muster which does not have practical application in that society. Every political theory must be assessed in light of the question, "Will it work?" Skillen has confidence that a theory truly based on the gospel will ultimately work.

Skillen argues that no political theory can ignore the fundamental premise of the Bible that the pursuit of justice is a given. Christians are not free to choose or not to choose justice, as if it were an option. The pursuit of justice is a life-long mandate (26). With this in mind, he outlines four basic requirements of a Christian political perspective:

1. It must allow us to deal with the full reality of politics and government.
2. It must come to grips with the real history of American politics.