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Christian Grace and Pagan Virtue: The Theological Foundation of Ambrose's Ethics (Oxford Studies in Historical Theology)

By J. Warren Smith



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Ambrose of Milan (340-397) was the first Christian bishop to write a systematic account of Christian ethics, in the treatise *De Officiis*, variously translated as "on duties" or "on responsibilities." But Ambrose also dealt with the moral life in other works, notably his sermons on the patriarchs and his addresses to catechumens and newly baptized. There is a vast modern literature on Ambrose, but only in recent decades has he begun to be taken seriously as a thinker, not just as a working bishop and ecclesiastical politician. Because Ambrose was one of the few Latin Christian writers in antiquity who knew Greek, another major area of Ambrose scholarship has been the study of his sources, notably the Jewish philosopher Philo, and Christian writers such as Origen of Alexandria. In this book, Warren Smith examines the neglected biblical, liturgical and theological foundations of Ambrose's thought on ethics. Earlier studies have found little that was distinctively Christian in Ambrose's image of the virtuous person. Smith shows that though, like the pagans, Ambrose emphasized moderation, courage, justice, and prudence, for him these characteristics were shaped by the church's beliefs about God's salvific economy. The courage of a Christian facing persecution, for example, was an expression of faith in Christ's resurrection and the church's eschatological hope. Eschatology, for Ambrose, was not pagan wisdom clothed in pious language, but the very logic upon which virtue rests.



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Christian Grace and Pagan Virtue: The Theological Foundation of Ambrose's Ethics (Oxford Studies in Historical Theology) By J. Warren Smith Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #4131461 in Books
- Published on: 2010-12-24
- Ingredients: Example Ingredients
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 6.50" h x 1.20" w x 9.30" l, 1.32 pounds
- Binding: Hardcover
- 344 pages

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Editorial Review

Review

"In this careful new study, Warren Smith not only demonstrates the theological foundations of Ambrose's ethics, but he gives the most informative account of Ambrose's spirituality and theology of baptism to date. *Christian Grace and Pagan Virtue* will be of interest to students of early Christian liturgy, the history of Christian ethics, and patristic theology alike."

--Christopher A. Beeley, Water H. Gray Associate Professor of Anglican Studies and Patristics, Yale Divinity School

"Warren Smith's wonderful book is not about ethics. Far more important, Smith places Ambrose's ethical thought against the background of the whole theological drama, giving us a much needed view of how ethics in early Christian thought could be developed in the context not only of classical philosophical/therapeutic traditions, but also of Christian theology's emerging vision. In so doing, Smith also helps to recover the sheer vitality and constructive genius of Ambrose the theologian."

--Lewis Ayres, Bede Professor of Catholic Theology, University of Durham

"Here is a very insightful study on Ambrose as a moral theologian, which confirms, once and for all, that the bishop's perspective was far more informed and motivated by the appropriation of Scripture and the quest for Christian virtue than it was by concocting schemes for dominating Milan and Northern Italy."

--D. H. Williams, Professor of Religion in Patristics and Historical Theology, Baylor University

About the Author

Assistant Professor of Historical Theology, Duke Divinity School

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