

Bystanding and Authenticity in the Professions

Review of

*Professional Morality and Guilty Bystanding:
Merton's Conjectures and the Value of Work*

By Barry L. Padgett

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Reviewed by **Richard Reilly**

In *Professional Morality and Guilty Bystanding*, Barry L. Padgett utilizes insights from Thomas Merton's *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* in order to cast light on core issues pertaining to professional ethics and the value of work. The book consists of five chapters: (1) "Professional Ethics and Thomas Merton" (1-12), in which Padgett makes a case for the relevance of Merton's work to professional morality and that language structures the way we experience the world; (2) "Moral Theory and Professional Life" (13-35), where four theories of ethics are introduced as well as the challenges of establishing unity of self amidst one's myriad relations with others; (3) "Contemporary Challenges in Professional Ethics" (37-74), which highlights the dialectics of self and personal morality on the one hand and institutions (organizations), professional identities, and role moralities on the other; (4) "Professional Ethics and Moral Imagination" (75-98), wherein Padgett critiques the design of corporate/institutional ethics-training programs in light of Merton's contemplative insights; and (5) "Moral Imagination and Leadership" (99-123), which fills out standard theories of leadership by advancing the necessity of authentic selfhood as conceived by Merton.

If we recall how Merton wrestled over many years with challenges dealing with his profession, his institutional responsibilities, his public persona, and his attaining authentic personhood, it might be more apparent how Merton's writings such as *Conjectures* bear on issues endemic in the life of work. Moreover, Merton had keen insight into the situations he confronted or explored; his insights, which resonate deeply still, often were communicated via the penetrative descriptions and metaphors utilized by Padgett, e.g., "guilty bystanding," "suspension of conscience," "forced systemization of life," "over-stimulated society," "busy-ness," "submission to organized injustice," and "game-playing" as well as "seeing the big picture," "the law of love," "unity of self," and "self-knowledge." Padgett's method for illuminating matters pertaining to professional ethics via Mertonian insight is best illustrated by his critical discussion (77-81) of ethics-training in the professions (or the workplace

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more generally). Typically ethics-training programs, as Padgett spells out, involve presentations and discussions on: (a) the importance of ethics to the profession or organization; (b) types of moral theories; (c) the importance of theoretical perspectives to moral reasoning and sound judgment; (d) one or more “decision-making paradigms” or rubrics; (e) how (a) through (d) produce a well-articulated “justification” to a selected ethical issue; and, finally, (f) the application of the preferred method to specific cases involving scenarios fitting one’s profession or work responsibilities. “Training in professional ethics,” Padgett observes, “like the soldiers going through their drills, involves habituating oneself to making good decisions and taking right actions in difficult situations” (78). Padgett then shows how such ethics-training, leading to scripted or ritualized decision-making, is quite limited, if not self-defeating, from Merton’s perspective. Such training by-passes an integration of values and self and so leads to one’s “playing the game” and to a “suspension of conscience”; hence, it does not assure “good reasoning” or “right decisions.”

Professional Morality and Guilty Bystanding is an academic book, written by an academic, and, I should think, primarily for academic-oriented readers who are familiar with Merton’s writings and interested in matters pertaining to professional ethics and/or dealing with work and self-identity. The extremely thin “Introduction to Thomas Merton” in Chapter 1 does little to explain the nature of the contemplative life, as Merton conceived and lived it, and how it enables one to achieve authentic selfhood, and how it grounds the particular insights that Padgett utilizes. Also, Padgett does not provide much by way of summary or analysis of Merton’s views in *Conjectures* (or elsewhere) – only on seven occasions is Merton quoted at a length longer than three lines. Typically, one-fifth of a chapter’s analyses and one-third a chapter’s endnote references pertain to Merton while the remainders pertain to an array of theorists and scholars of ethics and social behavior. As an academic, familiar both with Merton’s work and with the field of ethics, I found a good deal of Padgett’s *Professional Morality and Guilty Bystanding* to be of interest. It deserves the attention of anyone who is prepared to benefit from “a kind of interfaith dialogue, in the spirit of Thomas Merton, between professional ethics and commitment to a contemplative, spiritual approach to life” (8).