In The Sacredness of Human Life, Mercer University professor David Gushee starts readers off on a technical footing, differentiating sacredness, sanctity, and dignity and how they pertain to human beings. This academic precision seems to promise both a Biblical and a philosophical approach to the growth of the Christian understanding of the sacredness of human life, and in fact Gushee comes back to these terms throughout the book. Primarily, however, we are treated to a history-based survey of the development of the Christian understanding of the sacred nature of human beings.

The author provides separate chapters on the Old and New Testaments, depicting both the consistency between them and the newness of the Gospel. Gushee notes that Jesus rejected the use of bloodshed as a way to solve disputes, despite the fact that the Old Testament contains elements “that permit violence for liberation and against oppression” (87). Establishing this peacemaking as Christianity’s standard, the author takes readers through a history of Christian failures to live up to it.

Moral deficiencies lead inevitably to theological and ethical debates, which have contributed to deeper understandings of the Christian view of the human. “Jesus didn’t just say no to violence,” the author observes. “He taught his followers how to find creative alternatives that could bring deliverance from violence,” such as going the extra mile and forgiving our enemies (87). Gushee places great hope in this creativity, particularly as he notes that with Jesus’s death, “God stopped at nothing to reach out to us” (101). The author endeavors to show how, at various stages in Christian history, a creative solution was found to address a grave moral evil.

The first Christian centuries offered relatively few moral failures besides the denial of faith when martyrdom threatened. Christians stood outside the corridors of power, far from the temptations that come with being social insiders. As portrayed in the fourth chapter, “The Sacredness of Life in Early Christianity,” this era nonetheless saw important ethical developments in the rejection of abortion, infanticide, and specifically Roman forms of brutality. Although persecuted and rejected by society, Christians maintained some relationship with the hostile Roman empire but kept their focus on rightful conduct within the relatively narrow confines of family and local community.

When making observations on the ancient Christian rejection of “the bloody spectacle of the gladiator games and … eating the meat of slaughtered animals,” Gushee, director of the Center for Theology and Public Life at Mercer, brings Christian “social criticism” to bear on the current culture (127), as if he wants to avoid abstracting these morals or locking them away in history. He sees contemporary society confronted with similar evils, noting that ancient Christian commentaries on these gory spectacles “speak acutely to our [present] culture’s attraction to violent, bloody entertainment spectacles, contrasting sharply with an alternative Christian way of life” (127).

Gushee moves back and forth between past and present because he believes, as he says in the introduction, that biblical morality
reaches its peak in the sacredness-of-life norm and that the biblical texts offer profound resources for this ethic today. Central to this message is his belief that Christian ethics develops as people of faith read the Bible and “attempt to shape a faithful way of life over the centuries, and that this conversation between text, tradition, and contemporary faith communities is never finished” (9). He sees his book as playing an important role in that conversation.

To its credit, the book’s historical approach shows the challenges of following Christ in this world, at first during the age of martyrs and later when Christians confronted the temptations that came with occupying powerful social positions. Chapter 5, dealing with the turn from the persecution of Christians to the establishment of Christendom, never romanticizes Constantine’s settlement, and instead notes the damage done to the moral foundations that had been laid earlier, when Christianity was not shackled to the mainstream culture. Gushee cites Susan Wise Bauer’s note that “the interweaving of the two traditions [Roman imperial and Christian] continued to change both of them in ways that would prove impossible to undo” (155).

The imperial intrusion into Christian life led to the end of the eschatological Kingdom of God, replaced as it was by the codification of doctrine and the adoption of “a Platonic ontology of being,” something Gushee regrets (157). Christianity became less radically Hebrew and more mainstream Greek, the author seems to be saying, lamenting what he sees as what this really meant: “When violence moved from being a mark of the need for God’s kingdom to a mark of God’s kingdom, there indeed was a dramatic negation of Christianity’s original moral vision” (158). Gushee needs to provide more clarity on why “Hellenization” was so bad for Christianity, especially in light of Pope Benedict’s eloquent opposition to Christianity’s centuries-long dehellenization. Does Hellenization necessarily lead to a more inhumane, less eschatological religion, and if so, how?

In treating the issues from a historical perspective, Gushee shows how, in the fight against the more corrupt elements in society and even in the Church establishment, the prophetic voices of a particular era often provided new insight. He argues that the Constantinian settlement, which protected the Church and gave Christians a favored status in the empire, was unfortunate in some ways because it added to the temptations the faithful faced.

Gushee spends the next chapters analyzing the results of this new power, although the facts he uses in his own argument do not always support his often negative view of Christendom. The new temptations, rather than being the last word, frequently provoked challenge and debate, which led to a renewal of the earlier, more urgent and radical eschatological vision. We see an example of this in chapter 6, which deals with the Crusades, highlighting St. Francis of Assisi’s charming attempt to break through the official war propaganda of the Church to humanize the sultan and the Egyptian Muslims.

Gushee also reminds readers of the harsh treatment of the Amerindians by the Spanish in the sixteenth century, which led Dominican priest Bartolome de Las Casas to highlight, like St. Francis, the radical nature of Christ’s call. The friar’s eyewitness accounts of Spanish atrocities reflect how, once Christianity had embedded itself in a culture, it often lost contact with its original charism, and how the supposedly Christianized culture, for its part, showed no signs of following Christ.

With Las Casas, readers get a first taste of Gushee’s intellectual forays into the work of significant thinkers. In the seventh chapter, “Enlightenment Transitions: Natural Rights, Rule of Law, and Human Dignity,” Gushee treats John Locke at length, unearthing nuances in the philosopher’s thought, such as his views on private property. What makes the author of The Sacredness of Human Life hard to pin down sometimes is that he looks at the layers of interpretation of such thinkers, noting for example that it is not the Englishman’s view of property that caused harm, but later conclusions drawn from it, which led to inequalities and an overly rapacious capitalism.

Whatever Locke’s weaknesses, Gushee argues that he played a largely positive
role in the development of the conception of human dignity: “Locke deserves credit for being among the first in modern times to retrieve the radical egalitarianism to be drawn upon in Scripture” (230). Throughout The Sacredness of Human Life, Gushee rejects hierarchy, arguing that we all equally enjoy the same rights and dignity. The author praises Locke for being “far ahead of his time” for highlighting “the significance of the capacity of each adult person to make spiritual and moral choices freely and in good conscience,” which “helped reinforce the need for a political order that protected freedom of conscience and inquiry” (232).

In the same chapter, Gushee traces the slow but clear decline of Christendom with an analysis of Kant and the challenges of Kant’s thought for Christian ethics. Particularly problematic for Gushee, the German philosopher tried to maintain an ethical worldview based in Christianity while turning away from the Bible and the faith. By focusing on the depth of Kant’s thought while simultaneously showing how it brought about the transition away from a Christian worldview, Gushee displays his own main strength, which is clarity while discussing complex thinkers. He ably highlights the interconnections among various schools of thought and their wider ramifications.

This makes the book readable, rewarding, and interesting for the educated public. The explanation of why Kant’s views led to epistemological uncertainty in connection, for instance, with the mediated way in which we perceive things through the senses, easily leads into the next chapter, on Nietzsche, and to Nietzsche’s treatment of this uncertainty and lack of faith in God. As he did with Kant, Gushee ably brings together the major strands of Nietzsche’s thought and shows how they worked their way into the twentieth-century European worldview.

These more philosophical chapters form the most engaging parts of the book, as the author shows how the loosening of Christianity’s hold on the hearts and minds of Europeans led to the great tragedies of the twentieth century. As ethical and spiritual events, those intellectual and cultural wars brought to a head the centuries-long decline of the Christian worldview in the West.

Gushee focuses on the Nazi atrocities, looking at the thinking behind them and the propaganda to which so many groups were subjected. By bringing up the twisted religious message of the Nazis, he shows the human need for a religion, even (when we lack alternatives) an evil one. He notes that Hitler’s whole program was “redemptive”; in the Nazi scheme of things Hitler was “called and destined to save Aryans, Germany, and the world” as a way to restore “a fallen Germany,” and it was the Jews who ended up bearing so much of the hatred (349).

Gushee implies that Nazism’s success had something to do with Christianity’s failure. Hitler’s fascism was “apocalyptic, eschatological, and messianic. It was everything tame mainstream Christianity was not (and still is not). It was full of drama and meaning” as it “told a compelling story of great danger, … with a savior riding to the rescue with sword . . . flashing” (350). In other words, Hitler was a hellish version of Saint George. Here, a note on the dangers of our current milquetoast Christianity, still devoid of drama and assertiveness, would have been appropriate.

After this difficult topic, chapter 10 centers on hope, that is, the “strong recovery of the language of life’s sacredness” that began after the end of the Second World War. Gushee seems to be saying that, despite the end of the Christian view of things in the West, Christian values prevailed.

The author never condemns the Church or Christianity per se, even in its Constantinian form, because he believes that certain low points in Christian behavior came not from the Creed but from fallen human nature. Gushee holds that gaining a deeper understanding of the Biblical view of life has enabled Christians throughout history to develop a stronger moral sense of things. He does not focus on ecclesiology or sound triumphantly Protestant, and he does not set out to prove that Rome or any other part of the Church has always been power-hungry and unscrupulous in the way that Hans Kung does in Kleine Geschichte der katholischen Kirche, in
which Christian failings somehow confirm the papacy as being hopelessly corrupt.

Gushee invites readers to see that the idea of the sacredness of human life comes from the Biblical vision renewed by these various crises. As a Protestant, Gushee sets the Bible as final witness, instead of the Church and its interpretation of Scripture. In that sense, the Catholic Church seems a little diminished in The Sacredness of Human Life, as its author never requires a magisterium or deposit of faith to orient his ethics.

One could come away from this book overwhelmed with the failures of Christians and their leaders to confront the big issues of the day, and likewise disappointed by western philosophy’s rejection of Jesus Christ and the moral vision demanded of his followers. Yet we see that it is out of creative Christian solutions to great evils in each era that Christ’s followers developed a sense of the sacredness of human life in the first place. Christians have repeatedly transformed crisis into opportunity.

A high regard for human life does not always have a Christian basis, especially in a secular society, something the author fails to consider in a satisfactory way. Gushee regards human rights and the underlying assumptions about human dignity in a too-favorable light. Marxist psychoanalyst and philosopher Slavoj Žižek, in The Fragile Absolute: Or Why Is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?, regards the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) as deeply anti-Christian, particularly as a move away from the Decalogue. The right to privacy, for instance, can be seen as the right to adultery, since this sin is best done in secret. The right to freedom of the press and to one’s opinions means the right to bear false witness. Religious liberty is in fact the right to worship false gods. Žižek goes so far as to say that without the Ten Commandments, there could be no Universal Declaration of Human Rights: the latter transgress the former.

Perhaps in some ways Žižek is a more perceptive ethicist than Gushee, for he sees what human rights and right-talk are about. Their increasingly unchristian nature since World War II deserves a sharper analysis in The Sacredness of Human Life, for even as the Western world has become more rights-oriented, it has become less Christian.

One could argue that Western Europe was most Christian when it cared little for human rights, or even that belief in human rights has come to occupy the place that religion did previously. Perhaps because a sense of human rights originated in the religion, Gushee too closely associates rights with Christianity.

Non-Christians have moved human rights language so far from its Christian beginnings that we now have people who speak of abortion and euthanasia rights, topics to which Gushee briefly refers but without Žižek’s insight into their anti-Christian nature. Nevertheless, Gushee warns that “the worry is that rights-talk is selfish talk, always about me claiming my rights. This concern is also sometimes articulated alongside a suspicion that all this rights-talk invites a cultural ethos encouraging the endless elaboration of increasingly dubious rights-claims, including, for example, a purported right to abortion. Wants become rights; freedom becomes license. This is the fear, and there are good reasons for it” (377). Gushee needs to take this appraisal deeper.

The lack of a bolder criticism leads to missed opportunities for critical reflection. Gushee infantilizes women who have an abortion by never calling them the chief agent of this sin. He explains away female culpability, pointing the finger at anything but the woman: “We need to support public policies ensuring affordable, quality health care to all Americans, especially pregnant women (married or unmarried) and their young children. Our nation needs a sturdy social safety net that can make having a child a thinkable option for more women, as well as quality education, decent wages, and economic opportunities for everyone so that raising a child is not viewed as a path to financial disaster in hopeless times” (360). He leaves out the most important point about abortion: pregnant women need to stop killing their babies. Evil always finds its justification.

It seems that Gushee fears offending certain people, a lack of courage that plagued...
contemporary Christians. In the service of the same nice Christianity that failed to stop Hitler, Gushee fears calling sin sin, a sad irony for an ethicist.

Catholics would do better to read Evangelium vitae (1995). Here Pope St. John Paul II lays out the ethical issues surrounding abortion and other practices that cheapen human life. He says, “Sometimes it is precisely the mother herself who makes the decision and asks for the child to be eliminated, and who then goes about having it done” (n. 58). In the next paragraph he notes again the moral responsibility of the mother even while admitting to complex psychological or societal factors:

It is true that the decision to have an abortion is often tragic and painful for the mother, insofar as the decision to rid herself of the fruit of conception is not made for purely selfish reasons or out of convenience, but out of a desire to protect certain important values such as her own health or a decent standard of living for the other members of the family. Sometimes it is feared that the child to be born would live in such conditions that it would be better if the birth did not take place. Nevertheless, these reasons and others like them, however serious and tragic, can never justify the deliberate killing of an innocent human being. (n. 58)

Despite his many keen insights, at points like this, Gushee compromises his Christian ethics too much.

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The Ethics of Organ Transplantation edited by Steven J. Jensen

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Of the many advances achieved by modern medicine, few enjoy as much favor as organ transplantation. For those receiving organs, there is the gift of new life; for those mourning the loss of a loved one, the consolation that some good has come of out of their overwhelming loss. When we look closely at the sources of this favor, however, there is more officialdom about it than popular sentiment. Many who are enthusiastic about others donating their organs are cautious when it comes to donating their own. Of course, there might be nothing more to this than a perfectly natural squeamishness. But as a number of the essays in Steven Jensen’s Ethics of Organ Transplantation make abundantly clear, there are good reasons to wonder whether organ transplantation as it is currently practiced is the unalloyed good that its promoters would have us believe.

One of the strengths of this volume is that it captures the complexity of the moral issues surrounding organ transplantation. It does this by including essays that range across the spectrum of possible views on the issue and bringing them into dialogue with each other. The result, rather than a disconnected assortment of differing viewpoints, is instead an extended conversation between experts, one that is highly informative, sometimes inspiring, and often disturbing.

The essays in this volume “arose out of a conference held in 2009 at the University of St. Thomas, in Houston, Texas, at which philosophers, theologians, lawyers, and medical doctors gathered to consider the ethical questions surrounding organ transplantation” (xxi). Preceded by Jensen’s lucid and insightful introduction, they are organized into five parts, each generally dealing with a major