

Two recent books offer essential guidance in the ever advancing and increasingly complicated discipline of bioethics. Gilbert Meilaender’s latest update of his *Bioethics: A Primer for Christians* is a useful tool for Christians of all persuasions—and others outside the tradition who want to “listen in”—on how Christians should approach issues related to the ends and purposes of medicine, particularly as they relate to birth, aging, and dying. Elio Sgreccia’s *Personalist Bioethics* draws richly on personalist philosophy and is a thorough, in-depth treatment of some of the most challenging issues at the intersection of moral philosophy and medical ethics.

Meilaender, a professor of Christian ethics at Valparaiso University and former member of the President’s Council on Bioethics, offers a gentle introduction to issues that are increasingly overlooked, or worse, ignored, by our Christian communities. The dominant method of bioethics that is practiced today is applied ethics, where certain ethical principles and values—justice, beneficence, and autonomy, among others—are introduced into the realm of medicine and then applied to particular circumstances. While this proves, on occasion, to be useful, it allows for little reflection on the moral significance of the practice of medicine or the principles that are internal to medicine that are necessary to address some of the most pressing questions before us today. There are many questions we might ask: Should doctors ever kill? What is the difference between procreation and reproduction? What is the value of human life?

This little primer is organized in a way that it can serve as both a reference manual for those looking for a concise analysis of a particular issue (be it abortion, surrogacy, organ donation, etc.) or for someone looking to begin to comprehensively shape their understanding of these issues in a manner consistent with Christian principles. Originally published in 1996, updated in 2005, and now again in 2013, this book offers an up-to-date assessment of bioethics that provides full consideration of the rapidly changing technology and science that dominate much of the practice of medicine today.

While Meilaender is a clear and thoughtful writer throughout this work (and his career), the final chapter on “Sickness and Health” is especially insightful. Rather than jumping immediately to the issue of healing—to
which much of the practice of medicine is directed—Meilaender demands that we first contemplate the purpose of illness. Suffering, of course, is one of the great theological perplexities, the subject of many treatises, debates, and doctrines. While Meilaender does not rehash past thinking on the matter, he directs us forward, offering a vision of suffering that is guided by the Christian virtue of hope. Hope, through our faith in Jesus Christ, allows us to fully utilize the gifts and advances of modern medicine, but reminds us that any attempts to do so on self-sufficient grounds are incomplete. Readers interested in this topic would also be well served by his recent work, Should We Live Forever? (Eerdmans, 2013).

While Meilaender’s work is geared towards bioethics beginners, Cardinal Elio Sgreccia’s opus, Personalist Bioethics, requires some serious commitment—but is well worth the investment for those steeped in the discipline. Written over the span of three decades, it has undergone several revisions and modifications, but this newly published volume by the National Catholic Bioethics Center is its first edition in English.

Sgreccia is a professor emeritus of bioethics at the A. Gemelli School of Medicine and Surgery at the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart in Rome and the former president of the Pontifical Academy for Life. His method and approach to bioethics is what he terms triangular: a foundation in philosophy and science crowned by ethics. Drawing on the Thomistic tradition, Sgreccia’s treatise is one of the most thorough and comprehensive texts to offer an ontologically grounded personalist treatment of the discipline of bioethics.

Beginning with the human person as our point of reference allows for the development of a robust ethic. “A metaphysical foundation allows the human person to maintain the possibility of grounding ethics on intangible values that are not subject to relativization yet are nonetheless communicable through intercultural dialogue,” writes Sgreccia. In a discipline that has come to embrace utility as a guiding principle, Sgreccia returns us to the human person, as unified in both the body and spirit, to guide our bioethical reflections. In valuing and respecting one another as persons, we then have the foundation for what a lived out practice of bioethics might and should constitute.

Clocking in at 900 pages, this work is not for the faint of heart, yet it’s made accessible through its thoughtful and clear presentation of topics and ideas. Divided into two major sections, the first section provides foundational philosophical principles for Sgreccia’s personalist bioethics along with a very useful history and analysis of the rapid development of the field of bioethics. The second half of the book is similar to Meilaender’s primer in that it offers topical analyses of a variety of issues that
concern the field today, ranging from genetic testing, to cloning, to clinical experimentation. Cardinal Sgreccia has spent a lifetime in service to the Church, and this work is nothing short of a landmark achievement that will be valued by ethicists, medical personnel, and clergy and laity alike, for many years to come.

What both Meilaender and Sgreccia share is a deep commitment to making the human person the starting point for the practice of bioethics. Such an approach offers the possibility to reflect on both our extraordinary capacities and our limitations—all at once. Bioethics: A Primer for Christians should be mandatory reading in our churches, schools, and families in order to provide foundational tools to approach circumstances or decisions that we will all face at some point in our lives. For those who have chosen to make this realm their profession, Personalist Bioethics offers some of the finest philosophical reflections available in Catholic bioethics. In a discipline that is often overly focused on progress and technological advancement, both Meilaender and Sgreccia have given us works that are rooted in timeless principles and truth. We owe them our gratitude—and our attention.

Christopher White
The Center for Bioethics and Culture


Reviewers have said that Abandoned by Monica Migliorino Miller is “the best book ever written on abortion.” However, since the book is a mere three hundred pages long, one might ask how so few pages could capture so much? Others have compared this book to Uncle Tom’s Cabin. Both books, Abandoned and Uncle Tom’s Cabin, are short but portray in poignant narrative the cruelty of systematic human rights abuses conducted under color of law, American law. I found this book as disturbing as Uncle Tom’s Cabin because it personalized what can only be called a travesty of justice. Both legalized slavery and legalized abortion have been described as “our peculiar institution.” Both institutions make mockery of the rights language in the Declaration of Independence. “Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness” were denied both to the slave and to the child in his or her mother’s womb, and Harriet Beecher Stowe and Monica Migliorino Miller, like Dante’s Beatrice, take their reader through heaven, hell, and purgatory.