The Ethics of Tainted Legacies

What do we do when a beloved comedian known as “America’s Dad” is convicted of sexual assault? Or when we discover that the man who wrote “all men are created equal” also enslaved hundreds of people? Or when priests are exposed as pedophiles? From the popular to the political to the profound, each day brings new revelations that respected people, traditions, and institutions are not what we thought they were. Despite the shock that these disclosures produce, this state of affairs is anything but new. Facing the concrete task of living well when our best moral resources are not only contaminated but also potentially corrupting is an enduring feature of human experience. In this book, Karen V. Guth identifies “tainted legacies” as a pressing contemporary moral problem and ethical challenge. Constructing a typology of responses to compromised thinkers, traditions, and institutions, she demonstrates the relevance of age-old debates in Christian theology for those who confront legacies tarnished by the traumas of slavery, racism, and sexual violence.

The Ethics of Tainted Legacies
Human Flourishing After Traumatic Pasts

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Acknowledgments

This book analyzes a distinct moral problem not yet theorized in religious or philosophical ethics: tainted legacies. I discuss the problems that compromised thinkers, traditions, and institutions pose in terms of “legacies” in order to emphasize how beholden we are to our heritage. The various social, cultural, political, and economic inheritances we receive – and, in turn, pass on – are formative and indelible. For that reason, I have tried to highlight the nature of legacies as something like family inheritances that, while not wholly determinative, nevertheless make us who we are.

As my personal anecdotes aim to show, even the most treasured inheritances are not without their flaws, but such legacies possess indispensable resources for human flourishing. Despite the tainted nature of many of the cultural, educational, political, and religious traditions that have shaped my life and this work, I have, more often than not, been the beneficiary of the wealth of these legacies. I am grateful for the riches others have bestowed on me and shared to make this project possible.

A number of colleagues read and offered feedback on the manuscript in part or in full. I am deeply grateful to Craig Danielson, Warren Kinghorn, Chuck Mathewes, Shelly Matthews, Ryan Andrew Newson, and Darryl Stephens for their helpful comments and suggestions. I also thank Robin Gill and the two anonymous reviewers commissioned by Cambridge University Press for their constructive feedback. Jim Childress, Chuck Mathewes, and Margaret Morhmann generously offered comments on various grant proposals that helped me develop and hone the project. And
I have drawn inspiration and encouragement in various ways from Rebekah Miles and Ellen Ott Marshall. Thank you all.

Material from several chapters benefited from excellent discussion at academic conferences. The project grew out of a 2015 paper presentation at the Society of Christian Ethics (SCE) annual meeting in Chicago, in which I grappled with the ethics of engaging John Howard Yoder’s tainted legacy. The generous reception that I received from my colleagues there has sustained me in countless ways over the years while working on this project. I regret that I cannot name everyone who offered those initial words of support, interest, critique, and encouragement, but I owe special thanks to Kathryn Blanchard, Marvin Ellison, Jennifer Harvey, Stanley Hauerwas, Aline Kalbian, Margaret Mohrmann, Kate Ott, Gerald Schlabach, Darryl Stephens, Cristina Traina, and Raymond Ward. Portions of material from the presentation and subsequent article appear in Chapter 6. Many thanks also to Tom Pearson and the anonymous reviewers at Teaching Theology & Religion for extensive feedback on versions of portions of that chapter, as well as to my colleague in the psychology department at Holy Cross Gregory DiGirolamo for comments on that material and productive discussion of the book’s central ideas.

I also refined portions of Chapters 1 and 6 in light of audience responses at the 2016 session of the Moral Injury and Recovery in Religion, Society, and Culture Group at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion (AAR) in San Antonio. I thank the audience there and at the 2017 annual meeting of the SCE in New Orleans, where audience members and anonymous reviewers at the Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics provided helpful suggestions on material that appears in those chapters and the Introduction.

I am also indebted to Elaine James and Simeon Chavel, who provided a welcome opportunity for me, as an ethicist, to present a shorter version of Chapter 3 to an audience of colleagues in biblical studies at the University of Chicago’s conference “Let Me
Hear Your Voice! Women, the Song of Songs, and Public Discourse” in June 2019. I am grateful to all of my fellow participants, but special thanks are due to Elaine for her collegiality and friendship, to Simeon for his insightful comments, and to Chip Dobbs-Allsopp for his gracious response. My Holy Cross colleague and Hebrew Bible scholar Mahri Leonard-Fleckman also provided valuable feedback on early versions of that chapter and Chapter 4.

I would also like to thank the audiences at the 2018 session of the Women and Religion Unit at the AAR annual meeting in Denver and at the 2019 SCE annual meeting in Louisville for engagement with the material in Chapter 4. I am especially thankful to Traci C. West for her challenging questions and to Margaret Morhmann, Ryan Andrew Newson, and Howard Pickett for extended conversation. The anonymous reviewers at the Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics also provided constructive suggestions on an earlier version of the chapter.

I cannot thank Darryl Stephens enough. Darryl generously read large portions of the material and offered critical feedback that helped me frame the manuscript. He also convened and organized, along with Elizabeth Soto Albrecht, a writing consultation at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary (AMBS) in March 2019 that brought together a group of female Mennonite scholars to “liberate the politics of Jesus.” As an outsider to the Mennonite tradition, it was an honor to join this remarkable group, and I am particularly thankful for conversation with Malinda Berry, Hilary Scarsella, and AMBS president emerita Sara Wenger Shenk.

The book also benefited from engagement on the part of students and audiences at public lectures and presentations. Many thanks to Beth Sweeney of the Holy Cross English department and (then) director of the Honors Program at the college, whose interest in the project led to an invitation to present some of its ideas to the Honors Colloquium and to teach an Honors Program seminar on the book’s topic. The excellent engagement from the stellar group of students in “The Ethics of Tainted Legacies” not only resulted in
one of my most meaningful teaching experiences to date, but also helped me refine the book’s argument. Special thanks to Caroline Kam, Rose Grosskopf, Elisaveta Mavrodieva, and Abigail Szkutak, whose brilliant insights I cite in the manuscript. I would also like to acknowledge the students in my “Social Ethics” course over the years who have provided valuable responses to my teaching of Yoder’s case that have informed my thinking on these issues. Finally, I am grateful to the Cothran Center for Vocational Reflection at Furman University in Greenville, SC, and its (then) director Eric Cain for their invitation to deliver the Peggy and Ed Good Lecture in 2016, where I presented initial ideas in the conception of this work. I am especially grateful for feedback that I received from my former philosophy professor, the late Jim Edwards.

Other colleagues provided critical forms of assistance with the project along the way. I am grateful to my colleagues in the Religious Studies department at Holy Cross for their support and encouragement. In particular, Tat-siong Benny Liew and Alan Avery-Peck offered constructive comments on the book proposal, and my department chair Mary Doyle Roche and Provost Margaret Freije provided support with funding opportunities. I owe a debt of gratitude to the College of the Holy Cross for a semester research leave that enabled me to dedicate extended time to research and writing of the book, as well as for Ardizzone funds that allowed me to purchase needed materials. Many thanks to Stacy Riseman and the Holy Cross Committee on Faculty Scholarship for a grant that supported publication-related costs, and to my colleague Amanda Luyster of the Holy Cross Visual Arts department for valuable guidance on cover-art resources. I owe the cover-art inspiration to my dear friend Kirbie Crowe: Thank you! Thanks also to Cheryl Ann Lenser for creating an excellent index and to my editor Beatrice Rehl and all of the folks at Cambridge University Press who helped bring the book to publication.

I gratefully acknowledge permission granted on behalf of the Society of Christian Ethics by the Philosophy Documentation
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS


Finally, it is difficult to account for all of the ways my family inheritance has made this work possible. My mother, Cydelle Dukleth Guth, and father, James L. Guth, continue to be a bedrock of support. No one celebrates my academic endeavors more than Mom, and no one proofreads better than Dad. I cannot thank them enough for the riches of their legacies. Thanks also to my brothers and their families, who enrich my life: Brad, Leigh, Alice, and Lydia; Eric, Meghan, Emily, and Austin; Gary, Sarah, Jackson, Benjamin, Eli, and Caroline. The last word of thanks goes to Craig Danielson, interlocutor and editor extraordinaire, whose partnership in life and the life of the mind is indispensable to me.