



# Dirty Work: The Social Construction of Taint

Edited by Shirley K. Drew, Melanie B. Mills and  
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■ reviewed by Sally Orwin

**W**e intend our work to honor dirty workers' (p.233). This is how the editors of *Dirty Work* summarise the purpose of this book, which is not based on a Christian world-view or theology of work. The language and approach is that of the academic social sciences, and this might limit its appeal to the reader interested in work issues in general, and or the Christian theology of work in particular. What the book does, however, is to provide useful insight into the nature of work which is perceived to be tainted in physical, social or moral ways: *'Workers create rituals, traditions, collective values, languages and meaning that identify the individuals as well as the work in more positive terms than society might assign to them.'* (p.5). Those who find themselves ministering in these

challenging cultures and working environments will find the conclusions of this book useful in terms of gaining understanding of the cultural, worldly norms which operate there.

The editors are all academics and practitioners in the social sciences based in universities in the USA. Their methodology involves immersing themselves in the worlds inhabited by dirty workers in order to hypothesise through established social science research methods how such workers create cultural meaning through their work. The book focuses in particular on how dirty workers manage what the authors call the 'taint' of their work, i.e. the stigma which can be attached to dirty workers by society as an apparent understood obligation to protect society from its dirty work (p.1).

The first half of the book presents the conclusions of research carried out by the authors into the law (in particular criminal justice),

fire fighting, truck driving, secretarial work, nursing, and caring for those with HIV, AIDS or addictions, areas of work which variously involve physical, social or moral taint. In the section on secretarial work, for example, the fieldwork focuses on the moral issue of how office workers often use 'bitching' as a way to *'reconstruct a socially acceptable image of self against the damage of recounted indignities as listeners show emotional response and interpersonal support'* (p.102). That is, bitching with other people in the office about indignities suffered from the boss or client is designed to restore one's self-esteem and credibility in the office. However, such behaviour can often be counter-productive in terms of creating and sustaining *'negative feminine stereotypes'*. A clear message is one of *reframing*: workers will usually try to create a cultural framework which allows them to attach a positive meaning to something that has been stigmatised.

In the second half of the book, the authors present case studies which provide the qualitative data on which their conclusions are based. This section contains graphic detail of the physical experiences which workers must cope with including death by violent means, environmental damage, and physical destruction. There are insights to be gained alongside the caveat that *'understanding the*

*experience is not the same as having the experience'* (p.193).

John Stott, founder of The London Institute for Contemporary Christianity, referred to the need for double listening: listening to the world and listening to Scripture. *Dirty Work* is an aid to doing the first. Christians are called to make disciples and bring in the kingdom of God through their

own relationships with - and behaviour towards - colleagues, patients, customers and end-users. The conclusions in this book provide insight for those involved in difficult areas of work as they explore culturally appropriate ways to tailor their approach in communicating the unchanging message of hope and compassion which is the Gospel of Christ. ■

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## Promotion

**I**f we are called to any station or situation in life, I do not know that we ought to reject it, merely because responsibility is attached to it; for if we can do good, we should not shrink from labour because it is unpleasant to us; but if duty points the path, set our hands and our hearts cheerfully to work.

There is scarcely anything in life to which some degree of responsibility is not annexed. If we are blessed with sound limbs, we ought to use them according to their office; if with a good understanding, we are bound to cultivate it. If we are possessed of riches, we should use them as good stewards who are to account for them. If we have servants, we are responsible for our care and good treatment of them; and if children, much more so and likewise to labor for their benefit in various respects. No relationship or situation in life can be exempt from responsibility; and though we may not covet those situations where it is increased, to endeavour to escape it wholly will be in vain, because in the nature of things impossible. To be content whatever we are, or in whatever circumstances we are placed, filling up the measure of our duties as well as we are able, is the only wise and safe plan - the plan which will most promote our happiness in the present life, and give us a well-grounded hope that we shall receive the welcome sentence of "Well done, thou good and faithful servant, enter thou into the joy of thy Lord."

"Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might." - Eccl. 9:10.

*Margaret Woods, Quaker, 1818.*