

# Lying Explored in Ethicist's Book

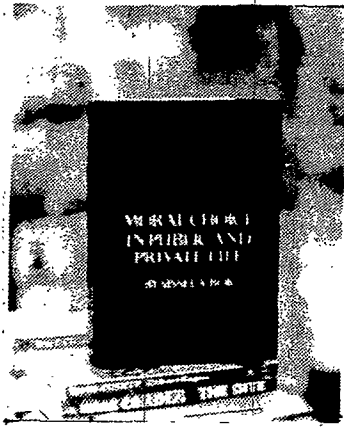
New York (RNS) — An ethicist at the Harvard Medical School has written a pioneering philosophical examination of lying and analyzed the possible justifications of all types of falsehoods, from medical situations to national security.

In her book, *Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life* (Pantheon) Sissela Bok finds that lying under any circumstances has negative impacts in that it erodes the personal integrity of the liar and diminishes the credibility of the liar when the lie becomes known.

While indicating that lying is always to be presumed to be a wrong, and therefore must always be justified by circumstances if it is ever to be used, Dr. Bok suggests that it may be permitted in circumstances which have been discussed and approved before a particular incident actually makes it a necessity.

For example, she writes that "if government duplicity is allowed in exceptional cases, the criteria for these exceptions should themselves be openly debated and publicly chosen. Otherwise government leaders will have free rein to manipulate and distort facts."

In discussing the ethics of lying, Dr. Bok writes that "the moral question of whether you are lying or not is settled by establishing the truth or falsity of what you say. In order to settle this question



we must know whether you intend you statement to mislead." She defines as a lie "any intentionally deceptive message which is stated," as opposed to deception through disguise or silence.

The author highlights the importance of lying as an ethical issue. "There must be a minimal degree of trust in communication for language and action to be more than stabs in the dark," she writes, "That is why some level of truthfulness has always been seen as essential to human society, no matter how deficient the observance of other moral principles. Even the devils themselves, as Samuel Johnson said, do not lie to one another, since the society of Hell could not subsist without truth any more than others."

Speaking of persons who say they reject all lies under all circumstances, Dr. Bok writes that "two beliefs often support the

rigid rejection of all lies: that God rules out all lies and that He will punish all those who lie. These beliefs cannot be proved or disproved. Many, including many Christians, refuse to accept one or both. Other religions, while condemning lying rarely do so without exceptions."

The author quotes Martin Luther, as cited by his secretary, as having written, "What harm would it do, if a man told a good strong lie for the sake of the good and for the Christian Church... a lie out of necessity, a useful lie, a helpful lie, such lies would not be against God, he would accept them."

Dr. Bok expresses concern at the acceptance of lying in society without the recognition that even if justified by circumstances, lies always involve moral questions. In this respect, she examines the use of deception by reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein to uncover the Watergate scandal.

"It can be argued that, in order for this exposure to be possible, deception absence of any acknowledgement of a moral dilemma. No one seems to have stopped to think that there was a problem in using deceptive means. No one weighed the reasons for and against doing so. There was no reported effort to search for honest alternatives, or to distinguish among different forms and degrees

of deception, or to consider whether some circumstances warranted it more than others."

In some circumstances, Dr. Bok suggests, a person does not have the right to an answer to a question at all. "Refusing to give information that could blacklist a friend is then justified," she writes, "and in cases where refusal is difficult or dangerous, lying may fall into the category of response to a crisis. One has a right to protect oneself and others from illegitimate inquiries, whether they come from intruders, from an op-

pressive government, or from an inquisitorial religious institution."

In contrast, however, the author declares that "having made a promise adds no justification at all to an undertaking to do something that is in itself wrong."

On the subject of withholding information, as it applies to public figures, Dr. Bok writes that "information about their marriages, their children, their opinions about others — information about their personal plans and about their motives for personal decisions — all are theirs to

keep private if they wish to do so. Refusing to give information under these circumstances is justifiable — but the right to withhold information is not the right to lie about it. Lying under such conditions bodes ill for conduct in other matters."

One category of lies which is especially open to ambiguities is that of "paternalistic lies" — falsehoods told to children or to mentally retarded persons who supposedly would not be able to understand or cope with the truth in some circumstances.

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## Insights In Liturgy

By MSGR. WILLIAM H. SHANNON

### Confirmation Task Force: Divergent Theologies

In 1975 Bishop Hogan organized a Confirmation Task Force to draw up guidelines for the administration of this sacrament in the diocese. The Bishop tried to make the Task Force as representative as possible. It included laymen, lay women, religious and priests, representing teachers, theologians, liturgists, parish priests, parents, school principals. The original purpose of the Task Force was quite explicit and seemed simple enough; it was to draw up guidelines for the administration of Confirmation in the diocese of Rochester.

This seemed to be a desirable goal, since a good deal of confusion existed in the diocese regarding the meaning of Confirmation, the way of preparing candidates for it and the age at which it was to be administered. This confusion was not peculiar to the diocese of Rochester; it was shared by other dioceses throughout the country and throughout the Church. But it was perhaps more acutely experienced in Rochester

because Bishop Sheen during his time here had decided that Confirmation should be administered at a later age than had been the custom heretofore. Hence it was unclear what actually was diocesan practice. The drawing up of guidelines, therefore, would serve an evident need.

As the Task Force met regularly, it came to realize that it had taken on a larger responsibility than it had at first anticipated. It came to see that, before guidelines could be drawn up, it would be necessary to clarify the theology of the sacrament of Confirmation so that the guidelines directing diocesan practice would be rooted in a solid theological understanding of the sacrament.

This proved to be no easy task, since presently there exist in the Church two divergent theologies about Confirmation. The first, a very ancient understanding of Confirmation, sees the sacrament as an integral part of Christian Initiation. This rite of Initiation, including Baptism, Confirmation and First Communion, constitutes a single sacramental experience, whereby a person enters into full membership in the Church.

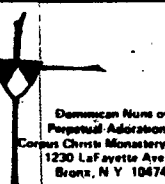
The other theology, a much later development in

the understanding of Confirmation, sees the sacrament as basically a rite of maturity, whereby a person, initiated into the Church by infant Baptism, makes a mature affirmation of the commitment made in his name at the time he was baptized.

Thus there are two divergent theologies of Confirmation: one that sees the sacrament as inseparable from Baptism and therefore as part of Christian initiation; the other that sees it as belonging not to initiation but to a later stage of Christian development, when a Christian is ready to express in ritual that he or she has arrived at mature Christian Faith.

Which of these should be normative for Christian practice? This was the first dilemma that had to be faced by the Confirmation Task Force. (Next week: How the Task Force attempted to solve this dilemma).

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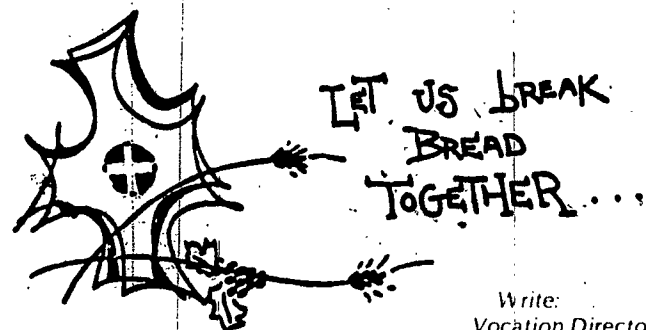
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