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# Beyond the Social Gospel: Church Protest on the Prairies

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## **Beyond the Social Gospel: Church Protest on the Prairies**

Ben Smillie

Toronto, ON and Saskatoon, SK: United Church Publishing House and Fifth House Publishers, 1991

170 pages

The theology of liberation, originating in Latin America and other developing countries, has appeared on the North American scene and has found its avid supporters. Yet theologians of both Canada and the United States are invariably reflective of the middle class. In such a context these voices tend to be excessively academic and often obsessed with theoretical constructs. In addition, liberation theology, much like any other style of theology, tends to have its day in the classroom and then pass on like any other fad. Theology, too, falls victim to the consumer idol of western culture. The liberationist position is especially vulnerable to this state of affairs. It is communal rather than individualistic; it sides with the poor in a blatant and open way, and it is sharply critical of the "feel good" theologies that dominate the Christian scene in the Occident.

It is in this context that Ben Smillie has given us his trail-blazing book. *Beyond the Social Gospel* is a liberation theology for the Canadian scene, or to be precise, it is a "hinterland theology" for Christians and other justice militants from the Canadian Prairies. Nonetheless, "hinterland theology" has a powerful Word of God to offer to all who have been waiting for an indigenous liberation theology "chez nous". Ben Smillie has given us the first offering, and it is of stellar quality.

Yes, the book is perhaps too eclectic. It tries to do too much. The sections on the ideological development of the social contract are unnecessary and would have been best reduced to a few integrated comments here or there in other chapters. As well, his various chapters or sections on Native peoples and feminism could have been incorporated more effectively in his fundamental notion of class. However, these minor observations do nothing to obscure the genius of Smillie's book.

In spite of its brevity *Beyond the Social Gospel* is a remarkably comprehensive book. It is profoundly biblical and highlights the key concepts underlying a radical vision based on the Gospel. His use of the Exodus and the ministry of Jesus are two good cases in point. In addition, he makes powerful use of biblical imagery. One such example is his comparison of the scorned "hinterland" of New Testament Nazareth with the attitude of the dominant Canadian society toward our country's prairie provinces. Given his supposition that all theology is inevitably political, he treats his readers to a brief overview of church history which demonstrates the political alignments of the church throughout its two millennia journey. In this section he identifies the salient areas of his own commitments. These convictions reflect a unity that is consistent with his basic "hinterland theology". At this

juncture he commences with an analytical description of historical Christian protests of the Canadian Prairies from the Meti uprising through the farm-labour movements early in this century to the current radical actions of today's Prairie movements. He both lauds these earlier efforts while suggesting ways to move beyond them. His concluding chapters bring together his radically theological fundamentals with a concrete call for a very specific life of Christian action for a new world community based upon biblical justice and peace.

*Beyond the Social Gospel* is a masterpiece. It is humble in its acknowledgement of Christian complicity with the powerful and wealthy classes. It expresses solidarity with all the marginalized sectors of our society: the aboriginal people, women, minority races, small farmers, and the working class. However, unlike so many of our progressive theologians, Ben Smillie does not fall into that middle-class liberalism which constructs its case on "pluralism" and human rights alone. He supports these concerns, but he builds them upon a clear and necessary notion of class, class dominance, and class struggle. With vital awareness of these realities, he moves beyond a Christian Fabian naïveté by exhorting Christians to organize with others in active attempts to transform an oppressive society into a radically different one informed by the revolutionary Christian Gospel. In this way Smillie's book stands alone as a beacon for us all. Canada has many profound theologians, among them Gregory Baum, Douglas Hall, and Jacques Grand'Maison. Ben Smillie should be added to this list. His *Beyond the Social gospel* wins him such a place. Among theologians he is our Jeremiah.

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### **The Catholic Church and the Authoritarian Regime in Austria, 1933–1938**

Laura S. Gellott

New York and London: Gerland Publishing, Inc., 1987

xx + 417 pages

Laura Gellott sets two tasks for herself in this published dissertation, what she calls her "dual focus". First of all she attempts to define Austria's inter-war authoritarian regime and describe its efforts to build an Austria to its liking. In this process she challenges those historians who are inclined to call the Dollfuss and Schuschnigg regimes fascist and describe them as shadows of Hitler's Third Reich. She proceeds to amass evidence which demonstrates that they are better characterized as authoritarian. In this respect she does not plow new ground, a fact that she acknowledges in her introductory chapter. She considers her second focus, the "question of