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Reconstructing the Common Good: Theology and the Social Order

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Reconstructing the Common Good: Theology and the Social Order

Gary J. Dorrien

Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1990

viii + 222 pp.

Dear Gary,

I write this review in the form of a letter because my purpose is that of dialogue between brothers. My concerns with your book are not chiefly intellectual. Instead my issues are those of faith and militancy. I too am a Christian as well as a democratic socialist, and I too am concerned about *praxis* or what the Capuchin radicals call a "theology of the feet".

From a positive standpoint your book makes a significant contribution to the necessary alliance-building required by the theological left if it is going to make a more significant contribution to North American Christianity. Further, you do a service by your biographical cameos which help to resurrect the tradition of Christian socialism. Indeed, I am grateful that you have spent some time in grounding these figures in the incarnation of their own activism or lack of it. By doing this you are helping to keep this movement alive in hard times. Your incorporation of feminist socialist Christians in the last chapter was especially useful. All in all, you have done a fine job in advocating democratic socialism from a Christian perspective, and you have been open in your criticism of those theologians you have sought to link together.

In spite of these fine qualities I have some serious reservations about the book. Your reasons for choosing some theologians over others strikes me as haphazard. For example, why not pick Dorothee Soelle over Jürgen Moltmann? She is a feminist; she has spent more time in North America; and she is a more militant democratic socialist than Moltmann. In fact, I am perplexed by your choice of professional intellectuals exclusively when you have so many choices of socialist Christians who acted and then reflected on their actions—Dorothy Day, Cesar Chavez and Martin Luther King Jr. to name a few. In short, your book seems a bit thought and idea oriented; that is, it reproduces the old style theology of a professional academic elite.

My second critique is the suggestion that your book reproduces much of the prejudices of American democratic socialism with respect to communism. I hasten to add that I share much of your criticism about Soviet tyranny and imperialism, yet I refuse to continue uttering the shibboleths and glittering generalities hurled against communism by the standard "red-baiters" of your country and mine. Communism, even in the years of the Third International, was never a monolith. This has been especially true after World War II. In third world countries the socioeconomic gains of communist regimes are to be commended, and the record of Eurocommunism in the 1970s is better than the continuing tired compromises of the

western socialist parties including the two to which I have belonged (the D.S.O.C. and the New Democratic Party).

In conclusion, I welcome your book. I see it as a positive contribution to a Christian vision that I espouse personally and that needs to be heard in the middle class mainline churches to which we belong. Solidarity!

Oscar Cole Arnal
Waterloo Lutheran Seminary

Cut Loose Your Stammering Tongue: Black Theology in the Slave Narratives

Dwight N. Hopkins and George Cummings, editors
Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1991
165 pp.

The reputation of Orbis Books as a publisher of texts actively committed to the liberation of people from oppression is enhanced by the printing of this excellent work. Initially the firm was dedicated chiefly to the publication of translations of Latin American liberation theology. Increasingly its presses are turning out books geared primarily to the North American scene. In the case of *Cut Loose Your Stammering Tongue* we see a powerful attempt by radical black theology to link up with its roots in the black slave culture of the United States. As a white middle class male Christian I recognize my inability to deal with this work in all its profundity. Nonetheless, I can still offer it praise and laud its pioneering contribution to an area of historical recovery critical to a church history determined to resurrect the radical and grass-roots character of the Christian gospel.

There is a movement afoot which examines popular religion in all its variegated facets both in the United States and Canada. It is often sociological and descriptive, but its agenda remains vague and uncommitted. Once again we are witnessing history done from a distance and for its own sake. Such is not the case with this book. The editors make their points with clarity. Their work is a process of "learning from the liberating faith that comes out of the actual mouths of the poor", a faith that compels black theologians to honour "the struggle for black liberation and full humanity" and "to mediate and privilege poor people's silenced voices" (p. xv).

They fulfill this task admirably. Not only do they uphold rigorous and scholarly methods, but they also provide a forum and structure whereby the ex-slaves are able to articulate the faith held while they were in chains. The old notion that white Christianity enchained the slave culture with remarkable success is challenged by this work. There seems to be no doubt that the white slave-owning elites sought to use the faith in this way, but their efforts were mostly in vain. In fact, the slaves used a powerful blend