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Passion for Justice: Retrieving the Legacies of Walter Rauschenbusch, John A Ryan, and Reinhold Niebuhr

Oscar Cole-Arnal

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In an early chapter devoted to the ethics or rules “glimpsed” as central to traditional Native life and conduct, the author sets forth such basics as the ethic of non-interference; the ethic of not showing anger; the ethic of how and how not to praise and show appreciation; the ethic of thinking things through thoroughly before actually trying them out; and the ethic of doing things only when the time is right. On the background of this perspective the author shows how Native philosophy more often than not places Native people in direct conflict with the general Canadian cultural environment and especially with the Canadian justice system. In contrast to the Canadian court system which seeks to incarcerate, separate, and prevent the accused from causing society any further harm, the Native practice is to utilize non-confrontative consultation and discussion aimed at rehabilitating, reconciling, and restoring the accused to community. Whereas traditional Canadian culture might focus on the negative inevitabilities of human nature, the writer observes how Native culture puts much more emphasis on the positive and potential in Native men and women in keeping with their “doctrine of original sanctity” (ch. 10).

I enjoyed reading this book. I believe it helped me gain insight into the mystery and otherness of Native culture and reality. The book does a credible job at explaining how the present dilemma and conflict between non-Native and Native cultures came to be. There are suggestions too as to how both sides might move forward from the present. In my mind, the writer has accomplished his objective: “If I have done nothing else in this book, I hope to have established beyond controversy that there was and still is a strong, complex, sophisticated and enduring Native culture which deserves our recognition and our study” (187). I wholeheartedly recommend the reading of this brief but engaging book, especially for our clergy and students preparing for ministry in Canada.

Roger W. Uitti
Lutheran Theological Seminary, Saskatoon

Passion for Justice: Retrieving the Legacies of Walter Rauschenbusch, John A. Ryan and Reinhold Niebuhr
Harlan Beckley
Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992
391 pages

Harlan Beckley's *Passion for Justice* is an important book in a number of respects, both in its framework of social ethics and beyond. I elected to review this book because of my historical interests and my sympathies with the three figures under discussion. My awareness of Niebuhr involves reading and study covering a thirty-year period, and I have been an admirer of Rauschenbusch for over two decades. Like most Protestants my

encounters with Ryan have been few. I suspect that most of us within the Reformation tradition have never even heard of Ryan. Quite likely the knowledge of these three social theologians among Protestants to some extent parallels my own. However, that experience has serious limitations in that it is, at best, only an imperfect indicator of the importance of the three. In fact, they are all giants—in terms of their contributions to Christian ethical thinking, their active commitment to justice in recent United States history and their impact. Harlan Beckley recognizes this and has given us a thorough and scholarly comparison of the three. His book is a major contribution.

Although there are aspects of the book which I do not find particularly appealing, that is strictly a matter of taste and not a critique. I like narrative and historical context; that is why I am a historian. Dr. Beckley on the other hand is a theologian of social ethics, and he uses the tools and methods of his discipline. In fact, he uses these exceptionally well. In spite of intricate detail and thoroughness the flow of the book provides clarity and moves the reader forward. As well, unlike a fair number of systematic theologians, Beckley is aware of history and employs it well. The reader is treated to the social, political, economic and personal context of the three thinkers. They are not disembodied ideas but rather real people in a very specific *sitz im leben*. Beckley does not allow us to forget that fact.

Further, Becker's comparative categories are indicated clearly, but he never forces the three men into categories that do not belong to them. As well, he demonstrates the evolution of their thought over the years. It is a tribute to the author that he treats all three with sensitivity and compassion, yet he never hesitates to offer balanced criticism. After all, his emphasis is on retrieving legacies rather than indulging in intellectual exercises. He uses these three giants as teachers for those Christians on the U.S. scene who are committed passionately to "doing justice". Balance, commitment, intellectual rigour and a vital subject make *Passion for Justice* a superb work which bridges the near past with a kairotic present. It is well worth the reading.

But what about Canadians? Have we not had too much of foreign voices defining our theology? Is this not a sign of theological colonialism? Certainly we have been dependent in our theological approaches far too frequently. We have not taken seriously our own seminal thinkers. Perhaps our *Passion for Justice* study might do a comparison/contrast of Salem Bland, Douglas John Hall and Gregory Baum or Jacques Grand'Maison.

This study would be most valuable. At the same time it is interesting to note that Bland acknowledged the influence of Walter Rauschenbusch, and Hall was a pupil of Reinhold Niebuhr. Thus, we need to be aware of positive influences which have come from abroad. Indeed, they may be valuable as well. This is true with respect to Beckley's book. Though written largely for Americans south of the border, it provides us with usable material for our own reflections. Perhaps it might even inspire us to take up a similar challenge for "doing justice" in our own context.

Oscar Cole Arnal
Waterloo Lutheran Seminary

Catholic Social Thought: The Documentary Heritage
David J. O'Brien and Thomas A. Shannon, editors
Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1992
688 pp.

It is not at all surprising that a new collection of papal social encyclicals has appeared immediately after the centenary of Leo XIII's pioneer letter *Rerum Novarum* (1891). There have been a number of these over the years, and one might wonder why yet another has seen the light of day. One reason cited by the publisher (Orbis Books) is reason enough to justify this work. The Maryknoll firm, which has given us so many valuable works on liberation theology, calls *Catholic Social Thought* "the single most comprehensive available collection of primary documents from Pope Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* (1891) to John Paul II's recent *Centesimus Annus* (1991)". This claim is not excessive and underscores the most valuable aspect of the book.

Catholic Social Thought is indeed comprehensive in two ways. Unlike many previous collections of papal social encyclicals, this documentary work contains the full texts of the papal letters rather than the habitual extensive excerpts of its predecessors. Thus the reader has at her or his disposal the complete primary documentation. This is no mean achievement and alone justifies the appearance of this anniversary work. Also, it is comprehensive in that it contains the full range of pontifical social encyclicals from the first century of social Catholicism's formal existence. However, the positive features of the book do not end here. The introductory pieces for the documents are the best that I have seen in such studies. They provide an excellent, though brief, picture of the social and historical context out of which they came, and they summarize effectively the salient points of each letter within the framework of the evolution of papal teaching. Finally, the book contains two recent and important American pastoral letters of great import.