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Book Reviews

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Keeping People at the Top Responsible to the People Below

By Thomas M. Landy

Francis Oakley and Bruce Russett, eds. *Governance, Accountability, and the Future of the Catholic Church*, Continuum

240 pp, \$26.95

As David O'Brien notes in this issue of *Conversations*, Catholic higher education, like many other institutions in the church, has been slow in responding to the sex and authority abuse crisis. Many of us were too much in shock, too disgusted at what had been going on under our noses, often hidden and enabled by bishops who had made their reputation by scolding a flock supposedly too lax and beholden to an indulgent, immoral American culture. We listened in disbelief as, even in the face of quite damning evidence, bishops and official spokespeople "measured out the truth in coffee spoons."

Fortunately, in March 2003, several scholars at the Thomas More Center at Yale University brought together an excellent conference to address some of the most glaring issues that the crisis had made all the more plain and painful to them. This volume, edited by Bruce Russett (Dean Acheson Professor and former chairman of political science at Yale, and also a key architect of the American Catholic bishops' 1983 Pastoral Letter, "The Challenge of Peace") and Francis Oakley (distinguished medieval historian and President Emeritus of Williams College) brings many

of the addresses from this conference to a larger public.

An address by Pittsburgh bishop Donald Wuerl opened the conference and serves the same role in the book. Wuerl's address highlighted episcopal accountability in ways that many people would welcome — in terms of openness and transparency. He was clear, however, that "the structures [for such accountability] already exist" in the form of diocesan and parish consultative committees. He urged that more should be done for fiscal accountability, and seemed to base his claim on the belief that "Most of the faithful assume and, I believe, rightly so that their priests and bishops are doing a good job."

He spoke about accountability "to Christ and his Gospel," (17) but he left out any form of direct accountability to the rest of the baptized. "When we address accountability in the church, we must be careful not to use a political model for a reality that transcends human political institutions" (18). "All involved here have to avoid the temptation to function politically as executive and legislative branches do but,

rather, to recognize the communion of the church and the uniquely ecclesial way in which we address issues out of our own fundamental unity" (23).

Yet for the authors whose essays follow, the problem is precisely the singular direction of direct accountability that Wuerl insists on. "To Christ and his Gospel" is of course the key kind of accountability that Christians should aspire, but (to paraphrase Niebuhr on original sin) many of us have seen too much empirical evidence of sinfulness on the part of bishops to think that some checks and balances would not be a good idea.

"Political" (ecclesial) structures are clearly on the mind of the authors, but it is the work of historians, not political scientists, that really undermines Wuerl's argument. A series of exceedingly capable historians, starting with *New York Times* writer Peter Steinfels, and followed by Francine Cardman, Marcia Colish, Brian Tierney, Francis Oakley and Gerald Fogarty, S.J., do the most to question Wuerl's assertion that the hierarchical structure of the church is detached from or above politics,

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or only legitimately Catholic in its present form.

As Steinfelds aptly summarizes it, “the present reality of this admittedly transcendent church... already reflects[s] political models absorbed and inherited from...imperial Rome, medieval feudalism and monarchy, Renaissance bureaucracy, modern diplomacy, and the nineteenth-century nation state” (28). With depth and clarity, the historians work to uncover a mythic “constructive narrative” that comprises a standard “default ecclesiology” to justify present ecclesial structures of governance. They describe how the church has developed and changed in terms of authority and decision making. Brian Tierney even asserts that far from being alien to the church, political practices of representation and consent as we know them developed first in ecclesiastical contexts: “In the thirteenth century, for instance, the Dominican order had an intricate structure of representative government with an array of checks and balances that would have

delighted the hearts of the American founding fathers” (49). He discusses in particular the medieval conflict over conciliarism as a form of government, the outcome of which was that the church “entered the modern world as an absolute monarchy” (60).

American church historian Gerald Fogarty, S.J., traces the shift from a strong sense of collegial or horizontal responsibility that marked the American episcopacy from the election of the first American bishop, to the centralization of the selection process under Roman control by the early twentieth century. Under the latter model, a bishop’s power and prospects depended far more on his status in Rome than it did on the respect of the priests, people or peers at home. It is not difficult to see how that model of accountability might impact the handling of clergy sex abuse cases in a diocese.

Oakley the historian makes the political connection in stark terms: “If the currently deepening crisis of authority in the church is

indeed one pertaining to ecclesiastical power, governance, and accountability, and I believe it is, then a solution is almost certainly going to elude our grasp unless we are prepared to grasp the nettle” (76). For all the historians here, history has “political” implications. As Cardman notes, “if the past is far more various than the default ecclesiology imagines, its future may also be” (47).

Russett’s conclusion is equally strong: “Every institution needs some mechanism to keep people at the top responsible to all the people below” (197). Russett knows better than anyone that a democratic system of pure plebiscite is not an ideal for a church or many other institutions. More precisely, though, he argues for the need to create an institution that is representative at least insofar that “it is possible for the people to remove leaders who consistently make decisions that damage the general well-being... Democracy thus means checks and balances, devolution, and periodic community re-authorization of the leadership” (198).

Along the way to that conclusion, James Heft argues that conversion of spirit by the hierarchy and the laity has to accompany the conversion of structures. For a church especially, the latter alone is not enough. John McGreevy, Thomas Reese, S.J., and Frank Butler do an excellent job outlining the costs to the church today, suggesting that the situation is truly unparalleled in American history. The reaction has been so strong, say McGreevy, because like “most social movements” this event very clearly “tap[ped] into a much larger well of discontent”(138). “Catholics accustomed to robust measures of accountability in almost every professional and civic component of their lives



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found themselves almost utterly unable to influence the conduct of their bishops and priests in the institution, the Catholic Church, that may lie closest to their hearts" (140). "What is striking about the sex abuse crisis" says Reese, "is that for the first time the bishops were attacked from the left and the right on the same issue" (147). McGreevy and Butler cite data about rapidly declining Mass attendance and mistrust of bishops as fiscal managers.

None of the authors expects great change or reform in their lifetimes, though all intend to remain in the church. Theologian Peter Phan offers a way through the problem by turning to a model of "kingdom-centered" rather than "church-centered" ecclesiology (thereby avoiding the problem of too many priests, bishops and police thinking that by covering up incidents they were properly 'helping the church'). But how such a change might come about remains to be seen. Bishops like Donald Wuerl may dispute the distinction, and are certainly unlikely to embrace as radical a change as Phan suggests.

Not all readers will be happy with this book. Traditionalists often claim instead that the real problem is a culture of dissent, whose real remedy is "fidelity, fidelity, fidelity," not governance changes. Yet I find it hard to believe that it should not be plainly evident at this point in the abuse crisis that the problems of episcopal hierarchy and accountability are central to the crisis. In the Archdiocese of Boston, where I live, bishops' notes and letters made public by court order showed an ugly disregard for the well-being of children and families who trusted the church to do the right thing. One



Students study in Creighton's Reinert Alumni Memorial Library.

has to ask how the handling of sex-abuse cases would have been different if bishops thought themselves accountable to the pastors and parishioners in the parishes they assigned serial abusers to.

All the bishops did not act so badly in the crisis, but the crisis did reveal how free many bishops felt themselves to be to disregard the norms previously set up by their own national committees.

Other readers will think that the focus on change in governance is too narrow. They will want to examine how celibate male clerical structure contributed to the crisis, and ask how the cri-

sis would have been different if women or married persons were part of the governing structure of the church. These questions were not part of the conference. Nonetheless, working out of their own scholarly strengths, these authors have made a great contribution to the dialogue about appropriate responses to the crisis. All who would oppose their arguments would do well to read this book first.

Economic Spirituality vs. Mindless Consumption

By Denis R. Janz

Tom Beaudoin, *Consuming Faith: Integrating Who We Are with What We Buy*.

(New York: Sheed & Ward, 2003). Pp. 119. \$19.95.

The intersection between religion and economics is a busy one these days, judging by the heavy traffic in literature on the topic. From one direction, and in a great hurry, come those who see the free market system as God's will for the U.S., and a globalized version of this as his will for the world. From another direction, and proceeding with much more hesitation, come those who think Christians ought to be critical of the free market because of the massive poverty and suffering that accompanies it. *Consuming Faith* approaches this crossroad as well, but it's not clear from which direction. In all fairness, it should be added immediately that this is not precisely the author's intention. Rather this book addresses itself to Christians who are simultaneously people of faith and consumers within a market economy. It invites them to reflect on what their faith has to do with their economic choices. And in the end it proposes an "economic spirituality," as an alternative to mindless consumption.

The author, a visiting assistant professor of theology at Boston College, does not develop a sustained and cogent argument for his position, but rather takes up, in no apparent order, several loosely related aspects of his topic. He begins (Ch. 1) by explaining how corporations develop brand identities, nurture brand loyalties, and invest logos with positive meaning. If companies can succeed in insinuating all this into the process of adolescent identity formation, their brands become part of who young people are. Unconsciously manipulated by this practice of "branding," people must be made aware that all too often, hidden behind the glamorous logo lies the sweatshop labor of the underdeveloped world.

Later in the book (Ch. 3), Beaudoin returns to the theme of branding, albeit in a far more murky discussion of the connections between this and classical Christian spiritual disciplines. Here, I must frankly confess, I was baffled: what the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius Loyola has to do with this corporate practice escapes me utterly.

What comes in between (Ch. 2) is relatively lucid in comparison. Here Beaudoin challenges the artificial separation people make between their spirituality and their economic views. Focusing in particular on Jesus' teaching on wealth as reported in the Gospels, he shows that spiritualities have inescapable economic implications.

In Chapters 4 and 5 the author returns to the devastating effects that multinational corporations have through their manufacturing operations in the underdeveloped world. This leads him to call for "a performative expression of belief in Jesus' humanity," and for a less dualistic understanding of the human person. Finally, Chapter 6 makes suggestions on how to develop a "maturing economic spirituality" – how to allow, in other words, one's faith to inform one's economic choices.

Despite this book's obscure passages, its loose structure, and so forth, I found myself in agreement with many of its basic positions. Two further complaints, however, prevent me from being effusive in my praise.

The first is a mere irritant, having to do with language and writing style in a book aimed at the general reader. The English language is rich: rarely is it necessary for good writers to resort to the creation of new words. Beaudoin invents many, and not pretty ones at that: "enmeshment" for instance, and "disat-

tachment," "enfoldment," "releasement," etc. Moreover, while some of the images Beaudoin are arresting (e.g. a Gospel text compared to a piñata), others are simply opaque (e.g. Jesus "knew how to toggle"). And still others, such as calling Jesus "God's economist," do not bear up under even a moment's critical reflection. "Popular" writing need not necessarily mean degrading the language.

My second objection is more substantive. At more than one point in the book Beaudoin digresses from the subject under discussion to issue a sermonette against "moralizing" – what he calls "the big turn-off." One wonders what he means by this; certainly almost everyone, from the Hebrew prophets, to Jesus, to the present Pope, to Beaudoin himself (!) can be accused of this. Even Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan was "moralizing" when he diagnosed the pathology of American corporate life as "infectious greed." The problem in issuing strictures against "moralizing" is that one thereby blunts criticism; and anything that stifles critical voices serves the interests of those who dominate in the existing economic system. In the case of Beaudoin then, is his abhorrence of "moralizing" related to his apparent refusal to take a position on the larger question. Can people of faith find a comfort zone within a free market economic system? Or do they have to remain permanently ill-at-ease, dissatisfied, critical, searching always for a better way? That is the real intersection between religion and economics, and it is one which this book avoids.

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