

## REVIEWS

Jean Porter, *Natural and Divine Law: Reclaiming the Tradition for Christian Ethics*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999. 340 pp. \$30.00. ISBN 0-8028-4697-1 (pbk).

Jean Porter, *Nature as Reason: A Thomistic Theory of the Natural Law*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005, 420 pp. \$32.00. ISBN 0-8028-4906-7 (pbk).

During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, scholastics (theologians and canon lawyers) and secular jurists led a revolution in theology and law. Guided by an understanding of natural law, they separated church and state (establishing a realm of ecclesiastical independence), systematically reinterpreted the Roman legal code (providing a basis for secular law), forged a new synthesis between theology and science (leading to the rise of early modern science), unified canon law, and laid the intellectual foundation for the theological, philosophical, legal and cultural development of Western civilization. In these important books Jean Porter seeks to retrieve this early natural law tradition for Christian ethics.

In *Natural and Divine Law* Porter explores the medieval idea of natural law, distinguishing it from modern conceptions. Beginning in the sixteenth century, when natural law was freed from its theological moorings, an effort began to purify natural law of religious elements and cultural particularities. The aim was to refine a common morality that would be compelling for all rational people, yet detailed enough to be useful. This common morality could serve as a basis for conversation amidst pluralism and, perhaps more nefariously, provide “rational” norms that could be enforced on less rational elements of society.

This distillation process has produced the familiar, denatured concept of natural law that circulates today. Long criticized by Protestants for presuming to moralize apart from the Bible and God’s law, the idea that we can discern moral truth by reason alone has been challenged philosophically by post-modernism and practically by the erosion of the moral consensus that made the idea of a universal morality plausible. Porter also judges modern natural law a failure, though she notes that it continues to have advocates in Roman Catholic thinkers, such as Germain Grisez and John Finnis and other supporters of a new natural law theory.

Porter argues that differences between early and modern views of natural law make the medieval idea attractive for Christian ethicists today. Far from seeking a purely rationalist basis, the scholastic idea of natural law germinated in the soil of a biblically informed worldview. Thus, before natural law was a moral concept, it was a theological concept. The scholastics believed God created the world, giving

it a rational order. This order included an eternal moral law which they believed was paradigmatically revealed in scripture, especially in the golden rule and the Decalogue. Moreover, they believed that when God created human beings in the divine image, God gave them the capacity to discern this order, including right and wrong. Sin diminished this capacity, but did not obliterate it or render it incapable of operating apart from revelation. Though they often equated natural law with moral concepts, broadly conceived, they primarily had in mind this universal capacity for moral judgment.

In *Nature as Reason*, Porter develops a constructive proposal to realize the promise of medieval natural law. Returning to natural law as anthropology, she notes that Aquinas and others thought human nature had two parts: reason and pre-rational elements. The later includes our needs, inclinations and desires. These have intelligible structures and purposes that are internal to our well-being. Humans, as a type of higher primate, need to be appropriately nourished, clothed, sheltered and nurtured by communal associations, such as families.

Porter argues that we should understand the purpose of biological functions in light of this larger context of well-being, rather than make crude deductions about the purpose of organs based on their shape or function. When we consider the teleological purpose of the eye, we should look beyond its purpose to produce sight and consider the role that vision plays in human flourishing. This approach invites—indeed, requires—theologians to respond to the best speculation of natural science.

Following Aquinas, Porter develops this insight into an eudemonic ethic in which happiness provides the proximate norms of natural law. For example, we do not fully grasp the purpose of our sex organs when we infer from the plumbing that sex is for making babies. Rather, we are called to understand and orient sex in terms of its teleological purpose in promoting the happiness, blessedness and flourishing of the human family.

Happiness, by her definition, is the best way to achieve well-being and consists in the practice of the virtues. The virtues, in turn, are deployments of human powers in ways that *normally* produce well-being. Temperance and fortitude are the proper deployment and perfection of passion. Similarly, justice is the proper exercise and perfection of the will.

Her discussion of prudence as the proper deployment and perfection of reason brings her back to natural law as law (*jubet*); that is, a command (*lex*) that binds (*legat*). Moral law is natural because it accords with our nature. Porter builds on this to discuss the juridical force of natural law in light of contemporary questions of universality and pluralism. Using human rights as a case study, she argues that there is no contradiction in Christians affirming human rights as a specifically theological concept and supporting human rights as a law that promotes well-being and as a framework for moral dialogue with non-Christians. Readers of this journal will find this section worth the price of the book.

Porter is a clear, well-organized writer who develops her chapters by way of a series of unfolding questions. Still, the uninitiated may be challenged both by the fact that she sometimes assumes a high level of familiarity with the subject and by

her detailed project's many moving parts. Her writing is also not "fast food," but it is richly rewarding.

Porter has much to teach us. Her understanding of natural law encompasses the whole orb of human nature, including pre-rational aspects and goods, while affirming the importance of reason for moral reflection. By offering a theological account of the givens of human life that is open to truth wherever it is found, she shows us a helpful way to relate reason and revelation, engage in conversation with the natural sciences, and negotiate difficult questions of universalism and particularity. By guiding us between the Scylla of imperialism (religious, philosophical or cultural) and the Charybdis of fideism that acknowledges no truth but our own, she shows us a way to faithfully engage a pluralistic world.

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Eric Voegelin, *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*. Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2004. xxiii + 102 pp. \$12.00. ISBN 1-932236-48-1 (pbk).

The republication of this classic work in political philosophy is to be welcomed. It provides a new generation with easy and affordable access to one of the most important philosophers of the twentieth century. In particular, it provides the reader with a single, concise source (amidst a rather daunting corpus) that expounds Voegelin's most well-known themes: Gnosticism and what Voegelin calls his "new science of politics." It also contains a new and helpful introduction by Ellis Sandoz allowing the reader to place this piece within Voegelin's larger work.

Nowhere does Voegelin more clearly define the Gnostic quality of modernity than in the two essays that comprise this book, even though he had developed the concept nearly a decade earlier in *The New Science of Politics* (1952). The first essay, "Science, Politics, and Gnosticism" (delivered as his inaugural speech as professor at the University of Munich, November 26, 1958), provides an incisive exegesis of several modern ideologues (Karl Marx, Auguste Comte, Friedrich Nietzsche and Georg W. F. Hegel). Voegelin argues that the core of Gnostic thought, whether ancient or modern, is the feeling of alien-ness in this world. This feeling in turn spawns a desire to alter this corrupt world through human means. In order for this corruption to be removed, reality (as it is given) must be rejected and replaced by a "second reality," an imagined and distorted world (26–27). Typical of modern Gnostic distortion is the denial of transcendence, or what Voegelin calls "the decapitation of being" (40). (It should be noted that often theologians familiar with ancient Gnosticism believe Voegelin misunderstands the movement. For Voegelin, modern Gnosticism seeks to escape via immanent means [e.g. politics]. Yet ancient Gnosticism sought perfection via transcendent means. Voegelin is well aware of this distinction but believes that this historical movement changed its

vehicle of salvation from transcendent means to immanent means. This change is due in part to the immanentizing of the Christian notion of perfection.)

Ironically, this delusional “murder of God” and subsequent elevation of man to “superman” leads ultimately to the death of man himself. Voegelin writes, “the deicide of the Gnostic theoreticians is followed by the homicide of the revolutionary practitioners” (48). This disorder is due to the fact that reality itself is in fact given and unchangeable, thus any attempt to destroy reality by asserting another reality produces tragic consequences.

Besides explaining the Gnosticism of modernity, *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism* also discusses the meaning of his “new science.” In an earlier work *The New Science of Politics* (1952), Voegelin had criticized the state of current political science and argued for a return to classic political science. (Voegelin’s “new science,” then, is really nothing new at all.) Now, in *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*, he returns to his “new science” and offers an application of its basic principles to modernity. According to Voegelin, a proper political science provides therapy to the disorder of this age by working from given reality. Thus, a true political science must be philosophic instead of Gnostic. That is to say, political science should seek to order society by given reality (including transcendence) instead of providing escape by looking to second realities. Not only does he provide “new science” definition, Voegelin’s essays are also exemplary analyses *qua* political science. He grounds his analysis of the disorder of the age in the entirety of given reality. (Of course, readers will wonder what I mean by “given,” and Voegelin answers this question by reference to an impressive analysis of human consciousness which involves a recovery of the Platonic–Aristotelian account of the soul.)

A brief word about the place of Gnosticism in Voegelin’s thought is necessary. As Sandoz rightly points out in his introduction, Gnosticism plays an important, though subsidiary, role in Voegelin’s thought as a whole. It seems that the most important and indeed interesting contributions of Voegelin’s thought lie in his later work (e.g. his theory of consciousness). The critique of modernity as Gnostic is simply a facet of a larger philosophic (and political) quest for truth. As a matter of fact, Gnosticism itself is only one of several factors that play a role in the modern problem. Voegelin acknowledges this point later in his career: “The application of the category of Gnosticism to modern ideologies, of course, stands. In a more complete analysis, however, there are other factors to be considered in addition” (xix).

The central place of Christianity within Voegelin’s “new science” may also warrant a word of explanation. Voegelin’s emphasis on Christianity may come as a surprise to those unfamiliar with his work. Yet within his philosophy it makes perfect sense. It should be noted that Voegelin analysed politics from a larger tradition, not just Christianity. This tradition could be called the classical tradition, which included both Greek philosophy and Christianity. The classical tradition, thus conceived, provided the clearest expression of given reality. Perhaps the clearest example of Voegelin’s use of Christianity as an element of his political analysis is found in the second essay of this work, “Ersatz Religion: The Gnostic Mass Movements of Our Time” (not part of the original 1959 publication). He

argues that the Gnostic goal of perfection is a perversion of the Christian concept of perfection. Gnosticism seeks perfection in this world via human means in contrast to Christianity, which views perfection as accomplished by supernatural means through grace in death (66).

The value of Voegelin's *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism* is beyond words. Theologians should praise Voegelin's recognition of the spiritual foundations of political movements and his call for a greater sensitivity to transcendence in political analysis. And yet they should be sobered by his criticism as too often they themselves have eclipsed the divine when entering the political debate. Political scientists should praise Voegelin for returning to the fundamentals of the discipline. He is not simply interested in voting patterns and policy analysis, but in the soul of man and its implications for political order. This brings to mind Voegelin's concluding remarks from *The New Science of Politics*: "it will require all our efforts to kindle this glimmer into a flame by repressing Gnostic corruption and restoring the forces of civilization. At present *fate is in the balance*" (Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics* [University of Chicago, 1987], 92, italics added). The stakes are high indeed, and the republication of *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism* helps us to appreciate what is most important. We must never allow our discipline, our "science," to eclipse the larger horizons of reality, particularly things transcendent.

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David S. Reynolds, *John Brown, Abolitionist: The Man Who Killed Slavery, Sparked the Civil War, and Seeded Civil Rights*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005. x + 560 pp. \$35.00. ISBN 0-375-41188-7 (hbk).

On February 27, 1860, Abraham Lincoln needed to get some distance from John Brown. Brown was notorious for directing the execution of five unarmed civilians in Kansas and later leading a raid on the federal arsenal in Harpers Ferry, Virginia. That raid ended in Brown's hanging, but opponents of Lincoln said that Brown's spirit lived on in the Republican Party. In his 1860 speech at the Cooper Institute—the speech that Lincoln said made him President—Lincoln defended himself and his party: "John Brown was no Republican; and you have failed to implicate a single Republican in his Harper's Ferry enterprise." Brown was a misguided "enthusiast" who thought he had a divine commission. Far from influencing the Republican Party, Brown's work ended "in little else than his own execution." Lincoln made a persuasive case, and he won the election in part because he managed to cast Brown out of the mainstream of American history. David S. Reynolds's great achievement in *John Brown, Abolitionist* is to bring Old Brown back in.

Reynolds frames the book as an exercise in "cultural biography," a genre he practised to great acclaim in *Walt Whitman's America* (1995). Cultural biography

treats culture not as the mere “context” in which a person acts, “but rather as a dynamic entity constantly seeping into the subject’s psyche and shaping his or her behavior” (9).

Cultural biography proves especially helpful in understanding John Brown. Even before he died, Brown was cast as a one-of-a-kind crank operating at the margins of history. Reynolds reverses this picture, patiently tracing Brown’s connections to Atlantic slave revolts, Transcendentalism, Puritanism, a changing economy, the culture of violence in Bleeding Kansas, and more. The connections reveal Brown not as a madman driven by some private revelation, but as one who synthesized so many disparate aspects of his culture that he began to transcend it.

The dense web of connections illumines the meaning of Brown’s actions. When he and his followers used broadswords to slaughter five pro-slavery men at Pottawatomie Creek in Kansas, for example, their choice of weapons reminded white observers of attacks by Native Americans and enslaved African Americans. It not only suggested a kind of solidarity across lines of race, but also called up exactly the images that terrified frontier settlers and slaveholding whites. Their use of broadswords forever shattered the image of the effete Northern Abolitionist. In a time when a Southerner could beat a Massachusetts senator to a bloody pulp on the floor of the Senate without fear of bodily retribution, Abolitionists with broadswords had a shocking quality that helped galvanize both South and North for war. Brown’s actions often took on symbolic dimensions, intended or not, and Reynolds’s cultural biography does more than any other book on Brown to help modern readers understand why he acted as he did and what his actions meant to his contemporaries.

Reynolds’s cultural biography gives primary importance to the role of religion in Brown’s life. Reynolds argues that Brown was a Puritan of the old school, a man born out of time. Brown studied Jonathan Edwards, but his real model was Oliver Cromwell. Like Cromwell, he did not hesitate to defy the laws of earthly powers in the service of the rule of God. He enforced strict moral discipline among his tiny bands of followers. He read the Bible without help or mediation. And he held such a high doctrine of God’s sovereignty that he could say that even the errors that led to his capture at Harpers Ferry “were decreed before the world was made” (25). Reynolds shows that Brown understood himself as an heir to Puritan traditions, and he delivers a cascade of quotations to show that Brown’s contemporaries, North and South, also recognized him as a Puritan. But the book does too little to flesh out just what it means to say that Brown was a Puritan. Reynolds clearly explains the Puritan influence on Brown’s willingness to break earthly laws to serve divine commands. But he could have done much more with Brown’s typological sense of history (and his own role in it). And Brown’s sense of the need for blood atonement for national sin cries out for the rich interpretation Reynolds gave the broadswords. On the morning of his execution, Brown handed one of his guards a note that read, “I John Brown am now quite *certain* that the crimes of this *guilty, land: will never* be purged *away*; but with Blood” (395). How did this vision of justice fit within the wider religious ecology of Brown’s

time? Reynolds offers hints and glimpses, but readers seeking a more thorough engagement with Brown's theology should consult the biographies by Louis A. DeCaro, Jr. and Stephen B. Oates.

Reynolds shines, however, in analysing Brown's influence after his death. (His analysis of the song "John Brown's Body" is especially keen.) Reynolds's Emersonian commitments show through in his emphasis on Brown's great influence as an individual. If, as Emerson wrote, an "institution is the lengthened shadow of one man," then Brown's long shadow "killed slavery, sparked the Civil War, and seeded the civil rights movement" (the book's subtitle; see also ix-x). Reynolds makes a solid case for each point. Even if all three of these "institutions" outrun the individual shadow of Brown, Reynolds succeeds in restoring Brown to a central place in any account of democracy in America.

This central role demands the attention of scholars who work in political theology and religious ethics. As advocates of democracy have become conscious of themselves as heirs to a particular set of traditions, historical studies of the thick, lived stuff of those traditions have become more important. Jeffrey Stout, Charles Marsh, Joan Martin, Gary Dorrien, Dwight Hopkins, Jennifer Herdt and others have all begun to explore the *Sittlichkeit* of democratic cultures. Reynolds's book joins those studies and demands that future works take account of Brown. Brown's significance breaks up too-easy dichotomies between minds formed by scripture and tradition, on the one hand, and minds formed to resist authority, on the other. And Brown's fusion of Cromwell's Calvinism and Locke's republicanism defies narratives in which the two are incompatible stages in the development of liberal society. When John Brown is back in the story, it has to become more complex.

Stories about John Brown especially complicate questions of religion and violence. Brown cannot be easily reduced to any of the positions on the standard lists of Christian stances towards war. He was surely not a pacifist, and he rejected in principle the just war tradition's demand for proper authority and in practice its demand for discrimination between combatants and civilians. And while Reynolds works hard to show the reasons Brown had for thinking that his attack on Harpers Ferry might succeed, it would be a mistake to think of Brown as a pragmatic warrior of *Realpolitik*. He was rather a Christian terrorist. He understood the symbolic power of violence, and he did not hesitate to use it against noncombatants. He believed himself to be acting as an agent of God's Providence. This did not mean that he thought he would triumph; it did mean that he believed that the blood he shed, including his own, might be caught up in God's work of redemption. Reynolds very tentatively suggests that Brown might be what Doris Lessing called a "good terrorist" (165). And one can make that case for Brown more easily than for someone like Timothy McVeigh because Brown's cause—and his belief that it could never be accomplished without bloodshed—now command such wide assent. But even if one is not persuaded by Reynolds's attempt to distinguish Brown from terrorists like McVeigh, his deliverance of Brown from a verdict of insanity forces contemporary considerations of religion, violence and political change to take Brown's views seriously.

Contrary to Lincoln's insistence that John Brown's influence died at Harpers Ferry, it has marched on through many of the social movements that have given democracy in the United States its distinctive shape. Brown's influence takes on new significance now, in a time when more and more people are losing faith in conventional political processes. No book does more to help us understand Brown's body, and his still-marching soul, than *John Brown, Abolitionist*.

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Henri Nouwen, *Peacework: Prayer, Resistance, Community*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005. 127 pp. \$16.00. ISBN 1-57075-593-0 (hbk).

Henri Nouwen was a Dutch priest and psychologist who spent much of his career working in North America. He wrote over forty books, most dealing with themes pertaining to the spiritual life. He remains one of the most popular devotional writers of our time.

The question of vocation was an important one for Nouwen. He spent a lifetime searching for the specific place God was calling him to serve. Though he held teaching positions at Notre Dame, Yale, and Harvard, Nouwen felt that God was calling him to live and work with the poor. His vocational search led him to Genesee Abbey in upstate New York, to Bolivia and Peru, to Nicaragua and Guatemala, and finally to the L'Arche Daybreak community. Nouwen finally found his calling by serving as pastor to this community of adults with developmental disabilities in Toronto.

Following Nouwen's death in 1996 at the age of sixty-four, the Jesuit peace activist John Dear collected Nouwen's writings on peacemaking and published them as *The Road to Peace: Writings on Peace and Justice*. The first three chapters of *The Road to Peace* comprise material from an unpublished book on spirituality and peacemaking that Nouwen wrote around 1984. With the publication of *Peacework*, Dear has published this Nouwen text in its entirety, including a chapter on community and a conclusion that were not included in *The Road to Peace*.

The context against which peace activists struggled in 1984 differs from that of today. The issue that looms in the background of *Peacework* is the nuclear arms race. Despite the difference in context, however, this volume remains relevant to peacemaking today. In *Peacework*, Nouwen develops a spirituality for those who march and advocate for peace. Nouwen presents recommendations to these activists in the hopes of preventing them from becoming what they resist as they resist. The spirituality for peacemakers that Nouwen develops consists of three religious practices essential to the life of the Christian peacemaker.

The first practice Nouwen recommends is prayer. He begins by observing that human beings are needy creatures. We have needs for attention, affection, influence, power, and to be considered worthwhile. At the root of our needs are often

deeply hidden wounds. The world is the environment in which wounded and needy people come into conflict and pass on their wounds and needs. Nouwen counsels that many works of service may be motivated by our wounds and needs rather than a desire for peace. The key for the Christian peacemaker is to live and act in the world without being infected by it.

In prayer, we enter into a space removed from those forces that oppose peace. For Nouwen, it is important that peacemaking flow from an experience of love. Prayer is one means toward such an experience of love. Nouwen defines prayer as entering into communion with the One who first loved us. In prayer, we find an environment different from the world. Instead of conflict and war, or praise and blame, we find love and acceptance. For Nouwen, "Prayer is the basis of peacemaking because in prayer we come to the realization that we do not belong to the world but to him who offers us peace" (37).

The second practice is resistance, which Nouwen divides into two phases. The first he refers to as "Saying 'No'" to the forces of death that cause war and conflict, but also creep into our efforts to resist war and bring peace. Saying "No" is based on the connection between inner peace and world peace. It entails resisting attitudes, such as judging or stereotyping others or not accepting ourselves, that build up the forces of death within us. It also entails confession of those attitudes that contribute to death rather than life.

The second phase of resistance is "Saying 'Yes'" or affirming and nurturing life wherever we find it. For Nouwen, affirmation of life is an act of resistance. Thus, simple acts such as visiting the sick or feeding the hungry are important contributions to peace. As the peacemaker seeks to affirm life, the temptation arises to separate the world into those who support life and those who do not. The struggle for life can lead us to divide the world into friends and enemies. Nouwen asserts that the true test for the peacemaker is love of enemy. Only the peacemaker that can love friend and enemy can say "no" to death without being corrupted by it.

The third practice of Christian peacemaking is community. Nouwen states that one of the saddest characteristics of our time is our isolation from others. Engaging in prayer or resistance can deteriorate into acts of individual heroism. This perpetuates our isolation. As a remedy to our isolation, Nouwen affirms that community is essential for peacemakers. Community does not simply serve as support for the activist, however. Christian community is based on a life of confession and forgiveness of sins. Through lives of mutual confession and forgiveness, we are freed from our isolation and given new courage and hope. It is only through hope based on God's promise of forgiveness to all people that peacemakers can face the enormity of the world's problems without succumbing to despair.

*Peacework* does not articulate a theory of peace. Nor does it develop a sustained critique of the use of American military power. *Peacework* is a devotional work meant for those who are actively engaged in the struggle for peace and justice. I wholeheartedly recommend it for activists as well as undergraduate and seminary courses in spirituality and peacemaking. This text is a good complement to

classic texts on spirituality and peace such as *The Journal of John Woolman*, Howard Thurman's *Jesus and the Disinherited*, and Dorothy Day's *The Long Loneliness*.

There are two features of the book that I find especially helpful. First, Nouwen organizes the book around the themes of prayer, resistance, and community. Organizing the book in this manner fits nicely with the current emphasis in theology on religious practices. I know of no other work that brings together religious practices and peacemaking as effectively as this one. Second, the book gives attention to the connections between inner peace and world peace. This book is written for activists. It articulates how attitudes and behaviors can undermine the work the activist engages in for peace. The practices Nouwen recommends, such as not judging, love of enemy, and confession, are fundamental Christian practices essential to bringing the world something that it needs rather than more of what it already has.

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