

Hittinger, John P. *Liberty, Wisdom, and Grace: Thomism and Democratic Political Theory*. Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2002. xxvi + 314pp. \$25.95 softcover.

Liberty, Wisdom, and Grace draws together essays on political theory published over a span of two decades. Covering a wide range of topics, the papers reflect the philosophical (Thomistic), theological (Catholic), and political (American) traditions that have informed the author's life and work.

The volume is divided into three parts. The first section is devoted to a study of the political writings of Jacques Maritain and Yves Simon. Unlike other Catholic intellectuals of their day, the two neo-Thomists embraced modernity while drawing upon the intellectual resources of the Church. In such works as *Man and the State* and *Christianity and Democracy*, Maritain applied Thomistic principles toward an appreciation, and defense, of liberal democracy. Hittinger's assessment of his achievement is balanced and perceptive; he is especially adept at describing the many political attacks (from right and left) that Maritain encountered throughout his career. In his study of Simon, Hittinger examines the French philosopher's understanding of technology. Technology may be an "engine for democratic reform," but its effects upon society can be disastrous: it promotes social alienation, weakens our connection to the natural world, and replaces "humanistic education" with training in mere technique. Most of all, Simon feared the emergence of a technological-political elite armed with the "dream of social engineering."

Hittinger's admiration for the neo-Thomists does not prevent him from casting a critical eye upon their work. He notes that Maritain often exaggerated the Christian "inspiration" for democracy. Moreover, he questions whether Maritain and Simon were always faithful to the "spirit and letter" of St. Thomas. In a lengthy study, remarkable for its attention to textual detail, Hittinger suggests that they did not provide sufficient evidence for their Thomistic defense of liberal democracy. Certainly, there are grounds in the *Summa Theologiae* for justifying the idea of equality of rights, but Thomas never endorses democracy as the "best" regime. Hittinger concludes that, despite the summons to the "primacy of the spiritual" in his work, Maritain remained mesmerized by the "democratic spirit" and the promise of unending "historical progress."

The problematic status of Maritain's egalitarianism becomes more striking when measured against the traditional approach of Aurel

Kolnai. Neglected for much of his career, Kolnai was an important conservative voice in mid-20th century political thought. According to Hittinger, Maritain is not always sensitive to the tension between the “dynamism toward equality” and the demand for “high liberty.” Proceeding with more “sobriety” than his teacher, Simon endeavors to ease this tension by employing the Catholic notion of “subsidiarity,” a principle which allows smaller “intermediate associations” within society to function independently of the central power. Kolnai rejects any attempt to reconcile “progressive democratic theory” with traditional ideas, for he detects in the democratic temper “a metaphysical rebellion” against “nature and God.” He thus remains unalterably opposed to the modern trend toward “total egalitarianism,” a movement that champions the “equality of similarity” and the cult of the “common man.” Instead of compromising with modernity, Kolnai recommends that a healthy society develop an “appreciation of difference and inequality.” He proposes a “metaphysics of participation” in which the aristocratic notions of “hierarchy and privilege” ultimately serve the goal of political liberty. The existence of hierarchies offers citizens ample opportunity to “participate in values higher than those normally and actually obtainable for man”; “privilege,” whether of title or profession, actually secures the commonweal inasmuch as it guarantees “a rampart to liberty” by protecting “the existence of relatively independent persons.” If the “equality of similarity” constitutes the “absolute sovereignty of man over the universe,” Kolnai’s politics of “participation” demands the humble acceptance of “limitation and contingency.”

In the second part on “Thomism, Liberty and Democracy,” Hittinger responds to various modern challenges to the Thomistic political tradition. He includes two lengthy essays on the writings of John Locke. In the first, he argues that Locke abandoned the “ethics of virtue” and adopted a utilitarian outlook on moral questions. In the second, he disputes the contemporary interpretation of Locke as a religious thinker and exponent of “Christian natural law.” He sees Locke as a “crypto-Hobbesian,” a political theorist whose writings offer arguments in favor of a “purely secular ethic” based upon the principle of self-preservation. Locke’s use of traditional themes is largely a rhetorical device meant to persuade and “appease” a pious Christian audience.

The final part on “Wisdom and Grace” touches upon philosophical and theological topics close to the heart of the Church. Hittinger offers a novel reading of John Paul II’s encyclical *Fides et Ratio*. He contends that the Pope’s critique of modern philosophy is

really an analysis of the Cartesian project. All the favorite themes of modernity—the trend toward subjectivity, the harsh separation of faith from reason, the “quest for mastery over nature”—find their origin in the writings of Descartes. By suggesting a renewal of “the philosophy of being,” John Paul hopes to restore “a sapiential dimension” to philosophy wherein faith and reason once again work together in harmony. The centerpiece in this section is undoubtedly Hittinger’s analysis of Cardinal Newman’s *apologia* for the role of theology in the modern university. For Newman, the exclusion of theology from the curriculum not only strikes at the very “integrity” of the university’s explicit claim to “teach all there is to know,” it ignores the tremendous “interdisciplinary value” of the “science of God.” All disciplines are by their nature “partial and abstractive,” yet the student enters the university in order to seek a “unity in knowledge,” to get a sense of the “whole view of things.” A “core discipline for understanding the world,” theology can serve to complete and “correct” other studies. Moreover, Newman warns that if it is not allowed a spot at the university’s table its seat will be “usurped” by other, lesser disciplines ill equipped to assume its function.

This outstanding collection is essential reading for anyone who, like its author, combines the “love of liberty” with a “passion for wisdom” and a “sense of God’s gracious presence.” If this reviewer has any complaint, it would be about the sloppy editing. By failing to provide adequate (or any) proofreading of the manuscript, the publisher does a great disservice to its fine author and his readers.

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