Cort recalls his enriched education at Harvard. He was influenced by Irving Babbitt and Paul Elmer More, as well as by Alfred North Whitehead. An important influence was the political philosopher C. H. ... and Francisco Suarez regarding individual rights and popular representation.

Cort became involved in the U.S. labor movement at the point when it underwent a major division. John L. Lewis began to organize unskilled workers in contrast to the skilled workers of the American Federation of Labor headed by Samuel Gompers and William Green. Many of the skilled workers were republicans, such as the Carpenters and Joiners led by Big Bill Hutcherson. Lewis’s Congress of Industrial Organizations was encouraged by the Democratic party. Cort was involved in labor circles seeking to counter the dominating influence of the Communist party in CIO politics. Much of this book details his efforts. It would have been useful had Cort addressed the work of Seymour Martin Lipset and Gary Marks, It Didn’t Happen Here: Why Socialism Failed in the United States (2000).

Cort became active in newspaper guilds in New York and Boston. In that role he observed the demise of many daily newspapers, which he attributes to the rigidity of the labor leaders. Boston was down from seven dailies in 1950 to two in 2003; in New York, The Sun, World-Telegram, Journal American, Mirror, PM, Star, Herald-Tribune, and Brooklyn Eagle have disappeared. Cort’s proposal for labor agreements that would permit newspapers to survive financially was rejected by higher-ups. Cort writes: “Where is union security and where is job security if the paper folds? We don’t like to be obvious, but if the paper folds, there is no union and no jobs—period.”

Cort acted as a bridge between Catholic intellectuals and Harvard faculty. Harvard government professors were surprised to find that their counterparts at Boston College supported the ideas of their hero, ... Jr., to Father Robert Drinan, S.J., later dean of Boston College law school, U.S. congressman, and president of the ADA.

Working with the Catholic Worker movement and Catholic labor groups led to his contribution to the role of the laity in Catholic thinking, especially through his contacts with Cardinal John Wright.
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The Catholic Worker Movement has inspired many young idealists, such as John Cort, as well as Catholic clergy, although not many bishops until Cardinals Terrence Cooke and John O’Connor of New York, the latter of whom proposed Dorothy Day for canonization (1997). Dorothy Day died November 29, 1980, at the age of eighty-three. Peter Maurin died in 1949; a successor was Ammon Hennecey, who lived and lectured on their shared ideals of pacifism and decentralism.

Cort ran for a legislative seat near Boston and came close to winning. With the formation of the Peace Corps, he was nominated to a leadership position in the Philippines. Sargent Shriver heard from Cort’s opponent with high recommendations; the old-line democrats were glad that the Kennedy administration provided jobs for Democratic reformers outside the United States. On returning from the Peace Corps, Cort became involved in the War on Poverty and Model Cities program in Massachusetts. (Many of the old-line Democrats who were glad to ship reformers to foreign lands suffered primary defeats when the reformers returned with intensified opposition to the Vietnam War.)

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Dreadful Conversions:
The Making of a Catholic Socialist
John C. Cort

John Cort died in mid-2003 after nine decades of an active and concerned life, soon after publication of his autobiography. Cort was converted to Catholicism when an undergraduate at Harvard College. He early became involved in the Catholic Worker Movement led by ex-Communist Dorothy Day and French personelist Peter Maurin, whose work centered around Hospitality Houses for the homeless and a newspaper, The Catholic Worker.

Peter Maurin had been a Christian Brother, teaching in elementary schools in Paris, but after conscription in the French army, he did not take final vows but joined a Christian youth movement. Looking for leadership from Christianity, Maurin had a profound distrust of coercive entities from trade unions to the welfare state. Peter Maurin was said by the editor of the Jesuit magazine, America, Father Wilfrid Parsons, to be the best-read man he had ever met. Maurin was inspired by authors devoted to individual freedom and decentralized political society: Nicholas Berdyaev, Peter Kropotkin, Hilaire Belloc, Jacques Maritain, and Christopher Dawson.

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John Cort writes: “I was convinced of the truth of Lord Acton’s aphorism about the corrupting effect of power, and surely there could be no greater concentration of power in the world than a U.S. government…. Here, again, I clashed with Peter. His gentle but rugged individualism could accept the spiritual discipline of the Catholic Church but not the temporal discipline of a trade union.” John Cort came from a post-Christian Social Gospel culture very different from the profoundly Catholic culture of Maurin’s study.
Cort has written a pleasing and engaging narrative interlacing his long life and the religious and social movements of his time.

—Leonard P. Liggio
George Mason University

In Defense of Human Dignity:
Essays for Our Times
Robert P. Kraynak and Glenn Tinder (Editors)
Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003
(252 pages)

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, people around the world are reexamining the last century’s commitment to human rights and political liberalism. The Cold War’s end vindicated key elements of liberalism, but globalization and international terrorism challenge them once again. Using new conceptual resources, some thinkers defend liberal institutions, while others condemn them for promoting individualism and atheism. Many Christians find liberalism philosophically problematic but are simultaneously committed to its ideals. Recognizing this intellectual and political climate, this book focuses on the nature and source of human dignity. Its best essays carefully analyze why liberalism presents difficulties for Christianity. Others, however, rely on philosophically vague concepts of religion and demonstrate considerable ignorance of contemporary Christian thought. The result is a flawed but important book that should interest both scholars and citizens.

Robert P. Kraynak and Glenn Tinder solicit contributions from excellent scholars, including Glenn Tinder, Susan M. Shell, Robert P. Kraynak, John Witte Jr., Timothy P. Jackson, David Walsh, John Rawls, and Kenneth L. Grasso. The Tinder and Rawls essays have been published elsewhere, but others appear here in print for the first time. Protestant and Catholic authors explore the problematic relationships between Christianity and democracy. They also discuss Dostoevsky, Kant, Pope John Paul II, and Martin Luther, providing exegesis and constructive commentary. Finally, the book features a discussion of abortion and euthanasia (Timothy P. Jackson, “A House Divided Again: Sanctity Versus Dignity in the Induced Death Debates”), which I recommend to anyone working in applied ethics.

David Walsh contributes by far the best essay in the volume (“Are Freedom and Dignity Enough? Reflections on Liberal Abbreviations”). Liberalism, he notes, finds itself in a strange situation; theoretical challenges have exposed its conceptual weaknesses while, at the same time, countries all over the globe clamor to adopt liberal institutions. Walsh responds by adroitly using Michael Oakshott’s idea that political language consists of abbreviations for more extended knowledge. Human rights discourse is appealing, he argues, because it is an abbreviation for minimal consensus, the dignity of the person, and the way that the political order depends on spiritual tradi-

tions. Walsh opposes those who uncritically reject liberalism, developing a nuanced account of why religious persons should support it.

I found two other essays particularly illuminating. Susan M. Shell (“Kant on Human Dignity”) carefully discusses how Kant grounds human dignity in the autonomy of the will. Persons have dignity because they can use reason to set ends, making them qualitatively more valuable than things. I recommend Shell’s discussion of Kant and poli-
tics, which challenges the image of Kant as a foolish child of the Enlightenment. Kenneth L. Grasso (“Saving Modernity from Itself: John Paul II on Human Dignity, ‘The Whole Truth About Man,’ and the Modern Quest for Freedom”) nicely brings out how the pope celebrates modernity’s notions of human rights while rejecting its defec-
tive concept of freedom. He makes good use of John Paul II’s pre-papal and papal writings, and understands how John Paul retrieves phenomenology within a philoso-
phy of being.

Unfortunately, Tinder and Kraynak contribute the weakest essays in this book. Tinder (“Against Fate: An Essay on Human Dignity”) discusses fate, the absurd condi-
tions that cause human beings to become the playthings of events; and destiny, the coherent stories that persons enact through their lives. Contrasting these two condi-
tions, he explores pride, suffering, hope and transcendence. Destiny is a very illumin-
ating idea (the great phenomenologist Max Scheler has some wonderful things to say about it), but Tinder elevates it to a moral obligation. For him, destiny originates in the “transcendent,” a concept that, I think, few religious persons can accept. Christians rarely see the Trinity as simply one instantiation of transcendence. Buddhists rarely view nirvana as merely one species in the larger genus “transcendence.” Instead, they define comprehensive destinies that all persons should pursue. By appealing to the transcendent, Tinder resurrects a version of religious pluralism (made popular by John Hick) that is largely discredited today.

Robert P. Kraynak’s essay is equally disappointing. Persuasively, Kraynak resists identifying Christianity and democracy, criticizing contemporary Christians who care-
lessly equate them. He also does a good job of analyzing the meaning of the image of God in the Bible and in Christian history. However, Kraynak depicts all modern understandings of human dignity as “Kantian,” ignoring important philosophical developments. For example, he claims that Pope John Paul II develops a “synthesis of Thomism and a Kantian version of phenomenology that tips the scales in favor of tradi-
tional natural law duties over modern natural rights” (111). Here, Kraynak deeply misunderstands the pope’s philosophical project.

John Paul II uses Kant selectively but draws heavily on Scheler, who was one of the great anti-Kantians of the twentieth century. Similarly, Kraynak stretches credulity when he labels Jacques Maritain a “Kantian.” Like John Paul II, Maritain is deeply critical of Kantian epistemology. Kraynak shows little awareness of the exciting ways in which Roman Catholic personalists use Thomas Aquinas and phenomenology to develop rights theories. To equate personalism and Kantianism is intellectually unfounded.