Christianity Incorporated: How Big Business Is Buying the Church

Michael L. Budde and Robert W. Brimlow

Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, 2002 (191 pages)

Max Weber once observed that the chasm that separates the mundane exigencies of economic life from Christian ideals has tended to push Christians attitudes about business in two very different directions. On the one hand, “time-worldly asceticism” Christianity has tended to preach the “spiritualization” of economic activity as if to avoid business dealings as much as possible for the sake of the simple acts of obedience and self-surrender to Christ. Christianity Incorporated would appear to stand squarely in this latter tradition. The authors, both Roman Catholic laymen and academics, lament that American churches—Protestant and Roman Catholic—have, in effect, been taken captive within the capitalist world order, and that the churches have thereby surrendered the spiritual goals of Scripture (particularly the Decalogue) just for the sake of the common good. Mystical Christianity, by contrast, has tended to choices over against capitalism. –they write, “encourage for-profit corporations to exploit Christian and religious cultural resources.” What sorts of ecclesiology does the Church need to put the tools and values of the common good to use in

Christianity Incorporated

SOCIAL THOUGHT
Budde and Brimlow begin their provocative study by casting suspicion on the contemporary revival of interest in “spirituality” in the workplace. All such interest, they feel, is manipulative; it encourages an instrumentalist orientation to faith, and it trivializes and domesticates the “radical gospel of Jesus.” Using the traditional language of “Christian formation,” the authors go on to observe that capitalism also seeks to shape the habits, affections, and dispositions of believers but in a manner that is absolutely antithetical to biblical religion. Capitalist practice, the authors believe, simply cannot be reformed or redeemed, and biblical Christianity must, therefore, stand entirely over and against it.

Not surprisingly, Budde and Brimlow are harshly critical of John Paul II’s *Centesimus Annus* (1991). “Wittingly or not,” the authors write, “what John Paul advances and develops is a vision of the church reacting to the world’s impact on it rather than outlining the church’s proactive impact on the world.” “What disturbs us most,” they continue, “is that John Paul accepts this diagnosis [that human self-interest cannot be eliminated from society by force without serious consequences for societal life] as an irredeemable feature of human nature and does not echo the gospel by calling the people of God to transcend their self-interest and pursue the life of poverty (which means no private ownership) to which we are called.”

Protestants, the authors continue, have little better to offer. They have also “sold out the gospel” by throwing in their lot with the “secular powers.” “‘The churches,’ they write, ‘give us no reason to challenge the economic system that exploits the poor and dominates all of us, nor do they give us sufficient reason even to modify the ‘natural’ play of market forces that reduce us to data points, units of productivity, and indexes of consumer activity. On the contrary, the churches sanctify capitalism and encourage its growth and domination through their urging of equal opportunity for all nations. In their view, the only thing wrong with capitalism is that it is not loved quickly enough to enable all people to satisfy their appetites.’”

What the gospel thus calls for, Budde and Brimlow believe, is for the church to take itself more seriously as a polity in its own right and to model an entirely different way of being in the world. “The point,” they write, “is not to design a more ‘moral’ polity and economy for everyone else—another version of the Constantinian temptation, a false obligation laid upon the Church—but to demonstrate to everyone else what lives dedicated to the kingdom of God might look like in our world.” How, surrendering “everyone else” to a presumably immoral polity and economy is to be squared with the love of one’s neighbor, is not made clear.

Budde and Brimlow draw their inspiration for their proposed “alternative polity” from the Sermon on the Mount. Curiously, they suggest that the “economic vision” entailed in the Sermon is well-exemplified in the traditional charitable soup kitchen. “Soup line economics,” the authors contend, refuses to endorse a hierarchy of status or privilege, does not encourage specialization, requires no-means testing or co-payment requirements, and entails no planning or calculation. “So long as there are people wait-
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The contention that God’s purposes in the world have hitherto been thwarted by our failure to “enact” the Sermon on the Mount as a political-economic experiment, for example, would seem to be simply another “health and wealth gospel,” though admittedly in a Left-liberal form. And so, although we should certainly be suspicious of economic motives and interests, particularly when it comes to ecclesial practice, Christianity Incorporated is not a particularly good example of how this suspicion can be made to bear real fruit.

—Craig M. Gay
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Liberty, Wisdom, and Grace:
Thomism and Democratic Political Theory
John P. Hittinger
Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2002 (314 pages)

This book is the seventeenth volume in the publisher’s distinguished series, Applications of Political Theory. It is a topical rather than a systematic collection of essays spanning twenty years of writing and teaching. Its purpose is to bring philosophy and religion, broadly understood, to bear upon contemporary issues in American public life, principally the meaning and experience of freedom. The author, a professor of philosophy at Sacred Heart Seminary in Detroit, is establishing a scholarly reputation as a critic of contemporary liberal thought.

Considered as a whole, these essays provide a comprehensive survey of the political thought of recent Thomistic philosophers, Jacques Maritain—the book’s central figure—and his colleague, Yves Simon, principally their understanding of the theory and practice of modern democracy. Secondly, Hittinger considers other thinkers in the classical tradition (Leo Strauss and John Paul II). The author also uses the occasion to treat some philosophical critics of the classical tradition (principally Aurel Kolnai) and the opposing Lockean tradition as represented by several constitutional scholars.

An autobiographical preface sketches the heritage that informs the author’s thought and sets forth his personal, political, academic, and religious credentials for undertaking these studies. He does not mention a noble feature, which this reviewer counts among Hittinger’s principal distinctions—the gifts of common sense, intellectual simplicity, and plain speaking, which manifest his Hoosier origins and his upbringing in the Virginia Tidewater.

The book’s sixteen essays are presented under three broad headings: (1) The response of Maritain and Simon to the political crisis of the twentieth century; (2) the contrasting views of liberty and democracy in the Aristotelian-Thomistic and Lockean traditions; and (3) the treasure of wisdom and grace that the author has found in his mentors, which include—along with Maritain, Simon, Strauss, and John Paul II—John Henry Newman, Flannery O’Connor, Marion Montgomery, and James Schall. Montgomery has provided the phrase, “the very graciousness of being,” which comes close to describing the purpose of this book (xv).

In remarks providing a Foreword, Father Schall portrays the author as heir and transmitter of a tradition that is continually in danger of submersion under the superficial and sometimes dishonest scholarship churned up by a hostile cultural and ideological environment. Hittinger regards with a sense of family honor the tradition that he defends and enhances in light of certain inadequacies that recent developments have brought to light. As he puts it, with characteristic succinctness, the world and especially our country have gone in a different direction from the one that Maritain and his colleagues did their best to point out. Hittinger considers it a humbling privilege to accept his generational duty to perpetuate and strengthen the family line that those philosophers did so much to enrich.

The author finds a wonderful convergence between that intellectual patrimony and his own family’s background—especially its military distinctions across several generations in defense of our freedom. He chose for his mentors other converts famous for blunt and carefully argued positions (Newman, O’Connor, Montgomery).

Hittinger’s characteristic facility for seeing “where ideas go” (Schall’s expression) also helps to understand his choice of adversaries who are guilty of doing their best to bastardize that patrimony. Their names are not the ones whom most students of these matters would identify as the culprits chiefly responsible for distorting the American Founding, thereby causing serious deviations from the classical-Christian tradition in our contemporary political culture. The authors whom Hittinger has selected are chiefly David Richards, Edward Wilson, Richard Rorty, John Rawls, and Steven Hawking.

The ideological character of those thinkers and the legions like them who “reduce reality” to the dimensions of self-interested agendas is manifest, Father Schall suggests, in the “closed curricula” of our universities while unclouded openness to the world as it is, lies at the root of Maritain’s work and of Hittinger’s other mentors. As Schall points out, “The fault line of modern social thought runs through our theory of rights and hence our understanding of natural law and its foundations” (xv). While classical natural right is always linked to corresponding duties, the moderns ground it in will (italics mine). Here is one area that Maritain left for his worthy successors to elaborate.

Hittinger is among the growing number of younger scholars, many of them associated with him in the American Maritain Association, who are hard at work on that project. One of America’s best friends from abroad, Maritain, is well-chosen as the centerpiece of this redemptive work because he took up all the questions associated with liberal democracy and traced them back to Aquinas (and thence, to the Bible and to Aristotle).

It should also be noted that Maritain (like Hittinger) was a layman fully at home in the world and was even (by his own admission) an “old layman” (in Maritain’s late