

A CONSCIENCE AS LARGE AS THE WORLD: YVES R. SIMON VERSUS THE CATHOLIC NEOCONSERVATIVES. By Thomas R. Rourke. Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc. 1997. Pp. 287. \$82.00. ISBN: 0-847-68325-7. Paper. \$26.95. ISBN: 0-847-68326-5.

Like anyone else, Catholics disagree among themselves, even about politics. What they share that distinguishes them from some others is the commitment to answering political questions in light of the deep down things about humanity. As a result, what may be conducted as internecine Catholic disagreements are necessarily catholic in their import; even as they contend with one another, Catholics are bearing gifts for the whole world to open. This last fact makes of particular value books of the present, rather rare sort. *A Conscience as Large as the World* not only states and refines a disagreement among Catholic minds, and reaches sober judgment with respect to the issues. It also makes available for all-comers—through its clarity, balance, and acute grasp of the challenges of contemporary liberal political philosophy—the premises of political philosophy for a world worth co-creating. This is a rich and insightful volume, to which Catholics and non-Catholics who care about some combination of politics, the poor, moral progress, and perhaps even paradise, might with profit attend. From the deep downs of the Catholic tradition, worked out in the best of the Scholastic patrimony from Aquinas through John of St. Thomas to the neo-Scholastics of this century, Thomas Rourke educes practical wisdom for today's political world.

Rourke accomplishes this through a sustained dialectical encounter between the neo-Scholastic Yves Simon and the Catholic “neoconservatives” Michael Novak, Richard Neuhaus, and George Weigel. Rourke sets out to demonstrate a couple of points that may not seem obvious. First, the neoconservatives he studies in this volume—notwithstanding their ample ratiocinations to the contrary—have lost their moorings in the Catholic tradition. Second, this tradition has better resources to meet today's political issues than they have articulated. Just how much Rourke succeeds in his twin aims, the reader will of course judge for himself. The issues are hard and subtle and are not amenable to a just airing in the space available. But it can be said that the argument is rigorous, balanced, informed, and (with perhaps a few exceptions) generous to the neocons.

The choice of Simon as the authentically Catholic voice was particularly apt in light of Rourke's concern to show the readiness of the Catholic tradition to speak to the modern world. Among the giants of the neo-Scholastic revival, Simon had the best grasp of the contemporary scene and the most to say about the nexus of political, moral, and economic forces that is the neocons' trademark issue. Simon is the under-appreciated treasure of that revival in this country, and Rourke does a service by softening the shadow cast on him by his mentor, Jacques Maritain.

My own judgment—which in this context I shall simply assert rather than amplify—is that Rourke has identified the weak spots in the neoconservative manifesto for “democratic capitalism.” But whether Simon offers as satisfactory an alternative as Rourke suggests, I am less sure. The issue, eventually, is the one that separates neo-Thomists such as Etienne Gilson, Maritain, and Simon from transcendental Thomists such as Joseph Marechal, Karl Rahner, and Bernard Lonergan: how the human subject knows and what it is that she knows when she does that knowing. Rourke grants that political theory worth doing must reflect the true facts about practical knowing, and an early chapter nicely contrasts Simon's and the neocons' stances on that issue. It is a particular strength of Rourke's account, moreover, that it grasps that in the neocons' most philosophically sophisticated account of the human knower, the one proffered by Michael Novak, the key concepts come from Bernard Lonergan. (31-32, 254) Rourke's wrestling with those concepts—too often slighted by wonks eager to get from “principles” to “policy” in a jiffy—is a commendable beginning. But it left me in need of more. There must be a sequel which works out in detail the consequences of siding with Simon or Lonergan on how human knowing occurs (*viz.*, intuitively or discursively), and then decides for one or the other. A thinker as careful and creative as Simon deserves to be measured against a thinker as careful and creative as Lonergan, from the human ground up.¹

The social justice encyclicals from *Rerum novarum* (1891)²

1. The comparison might include the two volumes of Lonergan's economics recently brought out as volumes 15 and 21 in *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan* from the University of Toronto respectively, Bernard J.F. Lonergan, *Macroeconomic Dynamics: An Essay in Circulation Analysis* in *The Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan* vol. 15 (Frederick G. Lawrence, Patrick H. Byrne, & Charles C. Hefling, Jr. eds., U. of Toronto Press, for Lonergan Research Inst. of Regis College 2000); and Bernard J.F. Lonergan, *For a New Political Economy* in *The Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan* vol. 21 (Philip J. McShane ed., U. of Toronto Press, for Lonergan Research Inst. of Regis College 2000).

2. Pope Leo XIII, *Encyclical Letter of Our Holy Father by Divine Providence Pope Leo XIII: On the Condition of Labour: Official Translation* (Westminster Press 1891.)

through *Centesimus annus* (1991)³ constitute important data for contemporary Catholic minds working out the conditions of a just social order, and it is no defect in these papal documents that they decline to specify details, particularly when it comes to economic orderings. God desires that our economic transactions be just, but I cannot see that He has revealed what constitutes a just economy. That question is remitted to our human intelligence—which we can hope will be cumulative and progressive—applied to a dynamic world order.

The neoconservatives are to be commended for insisting that the primary precepts of the natural law must be worked out with a *realistic* sense of the material conditions of current human living. And Thomas Rourke is likewise to be commended for insisting that the question for Catholics perennially is how to achieve the common good. “[I]n us,” Flannery O’Connor observed, “the good is something under construction,”⁴ and that construction goes forward not through exhortations to entrepreneurs to “pay a just wage” but through decisions that are intelligent in the concrete circumstances of a dynamic world order. As Rourke notes, “Underlying the thought of both the neoconservatives and Simon seems to be a Christian humanism in the sense defined by Simon: a Christianity that respects all people and believes that human beings can make genuine progress in this world.” (244)

Underlying any genuinely Christian or specifically Catholic political thought is the vision that the good to be constructed in each of us in this world includes that good that does not end in this world. However we succeed or fail in constructing the many goods that make up the good life of human flourishing, there is for all of us a good that is transcendent. The signal contribution that a genuinely Christian political theory can make today, over against a political liberalism closed in on itself, is to insist plainly, as Simon did, that “Christ is the transcendent norm to Whom all persons and communities are ordered. The good culture is . . . ‘open’ at the top, which is to say, open to the transcendent presence of Christ.” (215) To this ultimate norm, Simon and Rourke rightly remind their readers, must be subordinated the noble expansions of human rights and even the efficiencies of democratic capitalism.

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3. Pope John Paul II, *Encyclical Letter Centesimus Annus* (Liberia Editrice Vaticana 1991).

4. Flannery O’Connor, *Introduction to A Memoir of Mary Ann*, in *Mystery and Manners* 213, 226 (Farrar, Straus & Giroux 1969).

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