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**From the Selected Works of Thomas W O'Brien**

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# Religion and political thought

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*Religion and Political Thought*. Edited by Michael Hoelzl and Graham Ward. New York, NY: Continuum, 2006. ix + 292 pages. \$39.95 (paper).

In this edited volume, Hoelzl and Ward bring together some carefully chosen passages commenting about the intersection of religion and politics from key primary texts of the Western tradition. In accomplishing this task, this book goes beyond the usual collected reader format and delivers a textbook with thorough, yet concise, introductions that help place the primary texts in the context of their respective political, social and ecclesial controversies. The introductions are likely to be very helpful to students who might be unfamiliar with these primary texts and their authors. Each introduction includes a brief outline of the basic arguments of the author along with a historical outline of the basic controversies that give birth to these texts. These introductions serve to guide students through what often turns out to be uncharted philosophical and theological territory for undergraduates.

The book is chronologically organized and the primary authors are grouped under five broader categories, which are, in turn, each given their own helpful historical introductions. The first division is titled, "The Division of Christ's Political Body," and includes passages from Augustine, Aquinas, Dante and Luther. The second is titled, "The Legitimation of Sovereign Power," and includes readings from Machiavelli, King James, and Hobbes. The third is called, "Religion in Democratic Culture," and includes passages from Rousseau, Paine, de Tocqueville and de Maistre. The fourth category is, "Politics After Religion," and includes readings from Marx, Schmitt, and Lenin. The final category is called, "The Contemporary Debates," and includes passages from John Milbank,

Slavoj Zizek, Marcella Maria Althaus-Reid, Charles Taylor, and Jürgen Manemann.

In addition to its many strengths, the book also has an index of names and of subjects that are very helpful for reference and research purposes. It also uses largely accessible translations of the primary texts, which is a very welcome change of pace for those of us accustomed to sending students internet websites for primary texts, where translations can be awkward, imprecise or downright inaccurate.

Although the volume is a very strong collection overall, there are a few weaknesses of which the potential reader should be aware. First of all, the book is poorly titled. It is both inaccurate and misleading. A better title would be "Christianity and the Western Political Tradition," since the readings are taken exclusively from these more narrow perspectives. The current title undoubtedly disappoints many potential adopters. A second, less serious, issue has to do with the choice of texts and what I see as a few surprising omissions. As the editor of a book series, I understand the difficulties associated with acquiring permissions and staying within the publisher's prescribed page limits. I also understand the richness of this particular tradition and that second-guessing reviewers like myself will always find something wrong with the selection process. Nevertheless, I did expect to see readings from the likes of Adam Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral*

*Society, The Nature and Destiny of Man*, and John Courtney Murray, *We Hold These Truths*.

In any case, no single textbook should ever attempt to be all things to all instructors, since this is a formula destined to frustrate both publisher and editor, while satisfying few potential adopters. Hoelzl and Ward do an admirable job of collecting, categorizing, translating, and introducing eighteen authors in the western tradition that address the ways religion and politics interact. I could see this book being used in an honors class, or upper division major course where students are encouraged to read primary texts. I will likely adopt it the next time I teach my honors class examining the intersection of religion and politics.

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