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## MODERN CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING: COMMENTARIES AND INTERPRETATIONS

KENNETH R. HIMES, LISA SOWLE CAHILL, CHARLES E. CURRAN,  
DAVID HOLLENBACH, & THOMAS A. SHANNON (EDS.)  
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*Reviewed by Peter Corrigan*

Devastating natural disasters, unrelenting violence in Iraq and the Middle East, and a growing disparity between the first and the third world all make life in the 21st century bleak. One need only open a newspaper to read about suicide bombers or rebel attacks leaving more American soldiers, Iraqi militants, and even civilians dead in Iraq. A quick perusal of the web finds that 70% of Africans live on less than \$2 a day. This extreme poverty and lack of modern medicine will cause nearly 3 million—mostly children—to die of AIDS and malaria next year. Even the United States, when wrecked by the worst natural disaster in its history, seemed paralyzed by inaction as thousands suffered from homelessness and emotional trauma. In a world of such turmoil, cynicism, depression, and hopelessness can easily permeate the consciousness of American Catholics.

Himes and a collection of eminent ethicists offer a profound antidote to our current world. In their book, *Modern Catholic Social Teaching: Commentaries and Interpretations*, Himes and others find inspiration and guidance in the tradition that has formed Catholic social thought. Rejecting notions of hopeless complacency in light of such entrenched evil, the authors sketch out clear directives that the social teaching of our Church offers us. While the current book does not directly address the specific problems posed above, it introduces the philosophical and theological conceptions of justice, charity, and moral responsibility as expressed in our ever-growing Catholic tradition.

Several reasons explain why the current work represents an excellent commentary and interpretation of Catholic social teaching. First and foremost, the book is crafted into three distinct sections. The first section elucidates theological and historical foundations of modern Catholic thought.

Topics include conceptions of justice as found in the Bible and the evolution of natural law as used in Catholic social thought. As the section ends, the reader is provided with the social backdrop to Pope Leo XIII's (1891) landmark encyclical *Rerum Novarum*. Part two contains a series of commentaries on essential papal statements on Catholic social thought. Each of the 14 commentaries and seven essays unpacks a wide variety of contemporary Church documents. The selection of a variety of papal authors—from Leo XIII up to John Paul II—consciously attempts to be representative of the many voices of Catholic social teaching. Finally, section three examines the reception of Catholic thought in the United States itself. This includes a discussion of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' continuation of this tradition in several pastoral statements.

In addition to its design, the book is replete with excellent scholarship, detailed analysis, and appreciation for the depth of theological scholarship. Donahue, in his essay "The Bible and Catholic Social Teaching: Will This Engagement Lead to Marriage?" examines the historical context of justice as found in Scripture. Donahue defines the Biblical ideal of justice as "fidelity to the demands of a relationship" (p. 14). The author proceeds to offer insightful commentary on the source of justice from (a) the dignity given to all in the creation accounts, (b) the theme of God's liberation of the Israelites from injustice in the Exodus, (c) the compassionate God who protects the poor, and (d) the prophets challenging societies who take advantage of the powerless. Donahue then explains the etymology of the original Hebrew. For instance, he describes the principal meanings of the Hebrew terms for the "poor" (p. 21). From this analysis, he concludes that the poor can most nearly be translated as "powerless" (p. 22). Donahue continues, extending that "poverty was not itself a value" (p. 21) and the "terminology is a caution against misuse of the phrase spiritually poor" (p. 22). Examples such as this show the depth of scholarship seen throughout the book. This scriptural conception has great lessons to teach a contemporary America that has gone as far as criminalizing homelessness in certain cities. Tax cuts for the wealthy and the curtailing of social welfare programs also show a lack of connection to scriptural concerns for the poor.

When analyzing the selection of documents, it is essential that the book take up the single most authoritative statement on Catholic social teaching: the pastoral constitution *Gaudium et Spes* (Vatican Council II, 1965). Hollenbach discusses how reading the signs of the times guided the document in its discussion of social problems. Hollenbach correctly emphasizes that *Gaudium et Spes* differed from Western political thought's belief in individual human rights. On the contrary, the document insisted that "rights be understood in the social nature of the human person and in a framework of

solidarity” (p. 280). Hollenbach’s essay also points out the expanding nature of the Council’s views. Rather than focusing exclusively on the right to life and work, *Gaudium et Spes* includes a new look at just war, nonviolence, and nuclear proliferation. In a penetrating analysis, Hollenbach also points out the document’s important contribution toward dialogue and cooperation with the diverse cultures and religions of the world.

Since several authors provide individual analysis of the same document, a certain degree of overlap is present within the book. While one might easily view this as redundant, it can be used selectively as a sourcebook. When utilized in this manner, each chapter is self-contained. This structure makes it a compelling resource for both secondary and undergraduate teachers of theology. Additionally, students needing an introduction to the history of Catholic social teaching can consult this book as a succinct introduction to the topic.

In a world torn by strife and division, Catholics must continue to renew themselves in the inspiring words of Christ and the leaders of the Church. In its rich tradition, Catholic social teaching has provided a vision centered on peace, justice, and love of one’s neighbor. Pope Benedict XVI (2006), in his first encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*, reminded Catholics that the Church “cannot and must not remain on the sidelines in the fight for justice” (§28). While Church leaders have indeed been heralds for the prophetic message of the Gospel, their teachings have not reached as many of the faithful as necessary. This inaccessibility to the masses of the laity shows why many refer to the social teaching as the “best kept secret of the Church.” More direct ways, including preaching, teaching, and learning at local levels, must occur in order to disseminate this worthy message. Principals, teachers, and coaches at Catholic schools must keep such principles in mind when developing the Catholic identity of a school, planning lessons and activities, and designing school community partnerships. Passing on a concern for the voiceless must be an explicit objective of Catholic education. Thus, books like *Modern Catholic Social Teaching* are essential resources for priests, students, and teachers alike. If consulted and shared frequently, *Modern Catholic Social Teaching* and other works will ensure that such a rich message does not remain limited to a select few, but rather actively inspires work for justice for all.

## REFERENCES

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## **THE SCHOOL CHOICE HOAX: FIXING AMERICA'S SCHOOLS**

RONALD G. CORWIN & E. JOSEPH SCHNEIDER  
PRAEGER, 2005  
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*Reviewed by D. M. Keller*

*The School Choice Hoax: Fixing America's Schools* makes the argument that America's voucher system and charter schools promise more than can be delivered, not only deceiving parents but depriving the nation's school system of funds that could be more effectively used. The authors believe that choice in education should not lead parents to "abandon regular public schools to exercise their choices" but instead provide parents "better schools and better choices within the public education system" (Corwin & Schneider, 2005, p. 13).

The authors of the book, Corwin and Schneider, have significant experience in the education field. Corwin, Professor Emeritus of Sociology at The Ohio State University, has taught in addition to being a past director of basic research at the Department of Education. Schneider is the managing partner of an educational consulting company and serves as the executive secretary of the National Policy Board for Educational Administration.

The book is divided into six chapters, the first dealing with a review of school choice, then a discussion on what the authors claim are the exaggerated claims made by proponents of charter schools and vouchers. The authors then offer ways to improve charter schools, and why "choice schools" should be specialized and operated by local school districts. The last chapter before the book's conclusion deals with the challenges facing poor and minority students. This reviewer found the book to be well organized and researched, including many references at the end of each chapter.