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Building Cultures of Trust (Book Review)

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A quarterly faculty publication of
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came in the late '40s. Few American writers today have his agricultural pedigree; few know or remember what it's like to clean a hog house or sit in the cavernous glory of an empty haymow. Heynen knows the farm and loves it; and it may well be that the most memorable parts of the novel are Alice K's reveries in the barn and on the farm. That her parents' operation is going belly-up is not a joy to her but a horror. She loves the farm as greatly as she loves the Ford 150 she drives all over the country. Really, she is not dying to get away, and her redemption may be in her staying.

The Fall of Alice K is a farm novel, one of very, very, very few anymore, in a culture in which the number of people who work the land decreases significantly every harvest. It is clear that Heynen wanted this novel of his to be exactly that. He takes great glory in close and sometimes rhapsodic descriptions of farm life, occasionally at the expense of narrative drive.

And there's more. Some of us with Dutch blood find the novel a compendium of Dutch-Calvinist life in the rural Midwest, complete with a full recitation of the first question and answer of the Heidelberg Catechism. The novel is a GPS, an annotated map, of Heynen's homeland. The truth is, I could show you exactly where Alice K's farm stands, just off Highway 75, where he says it is. Anyone with any background in what the novelist Frederick Manfred called "Siouxland" could too (by the way, Manfred, another Dutch Calvinist novelist, is in the novel). Dutch Center is Sioux Center; Midwest Christian High School, under a slightly different name, isn't far away from the desk where I'm typing right now. Redemption College is really the place I taught literature and writing for the last 37 years.

In fact, I'm in this novel as James Schaapsma, an inclusion which perhaps should have barred me from writing this review. It's a cameo appearance I'm proud of, a quick reference to a prof who has no role in the story but teaches at Redemption College and writes short fiction. A ton of such brazen wooden-shoe reference and prototypes exists. Alice K's angelic English teacher at Midwest Christian is Miss Den Harmsel, a gracious reference to Dr. Henrietta Ten Harmsel, who was likely one of Heynen's

own teachers when he was a high school student at Midwest Christian—make that Western Christian.

Those familiar references make someone like me, a Dutch Calvinist from the neighborhood where Heynen grew up, smirk and smile at Heynen's cleverness all the way through, an aspect of the novel most readers, I'm sure, are not likely to share. And here's something else perhaps only a Dutch Calvinist would perceive: the novel's unique and even sometimes blurry vision.

What does a writer like Jim Heynen owe to his past, to his tribe, to his people? It's fair to say that he hasn't always thought the world of his world, his tribe—I could quote chapter and text. But *The Fall of Alice K* is more fully about respect than it is about love, even when respect is hard to give because love is so blessedly hard to find. Alice's mother is a strange bird, as we say out here in Siouxland, but threaded throughout the novel are references to her thoughtful character and intelligence, references that Alice hears but finds impossible to believe.

By the end, however, Alice's father's deep and unwavering stoicism, as well as her mother's paranoia, is somehow blessed, offering Alice K a place to stand, a place to dwell, in the preacher's terms. Alice's fall—her impetuous and angry, even, at times, arrogant behavior—is righted by her acceptance of what Lewis Smedes used to call her parents' "mystery," her acceptance of what she doesn't know about them.

This Dutch Calvinist likes to read the love story as a real coming-of-age story, the "fall" as a fortunate one, the novel itself as a treaty of peace between a writer and his people, because what's there at the end of the novel, quite grudgingly, is still a good, good thing—respect, which is, in a way, yet another word for love.

All the loving asides—the love of the farm, the respect he grants his people—sometimes diminish the dramatic movement of the plot; but then Heynen's new novel is a story to get lost in.

The Fall of Alice K?—Jim Heynen's new novel?—I liked it.

Then again, Dutch Calvinist that I am, I should.

Marty, Martin E. *Building Cultures of Trust*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2010. 192 Pages. ISBN 9780802865465. Reviewed by Donald Roth, Instructor of Business Administration and Criminal Justice, Dordt College.

"How can I trust ____?" Many people echo the concern that modern America is a society marked by a crisis of trust. How can we trust a government so slow to respond to the needs of victims of Hurricane Katrina, an economy rocked by the collapse of a credit default swap scheme, churches plagued by abuse scandal. The list goes on, and it is these sorts of questions that led Martin Marty, professor emeritus from the University of Chicago and renowned religious history scholar, to write this book.

The remedy, as Dr. Marty puts it, is building "cultures of trust" at every level of social experience, from the home to the statehouse, and it was this proposed remedy that drew me to the book. However, expecting a "how to" guide, I was disappointed to find more of a prolegomena to such an endeavor; nevertheless, this book, though a sometimes flawed meditation on trust, is shot through with gems of wisdom and arresting elucidations of profound truth.

As more of a scholarly set of "first things" than an

instruction manual, the book gives Marty's best insights in laying out a framework for understanding the nature of trust. We tend to think of trust in terms of whether we dare place our "trust in" someone or something. Sometimes we speak of a politician or institution having the "trust of" the people. Marty begins his approach from a more elemental level. For him, trust is both an attitude and an object, a feeling we express and something that can be fostered or built up. Trust is a forward-looking concern that enables risk-taking in the face of uncertainty, but it is a fragile thing easily broken and stifled by an excess of risk or uncertainty. It is both something we learn to do by successfully relying on others and something we are taught to do implicitly in our socialization. In all, trust is an essential ingredient in the formation and flourishing of society.

However, Dr. Marty points out that the one empirically provable aspect of humanity spoken of in humanist philosophy and religion alike is that humans are a consistently untrustworthy lot. This aspect poses a problem: how can something that is a foundational building block of society flourish when the people who make up society so often behave in ways which destroy rather than nurture trust? To reach a partial answer, Dr. Marty points to religion as one of the key trust-building aspects of culture; in fact, he cites many philosophers who see this as the prime purpose of religion. Rather than trust in individuals, Marty says that religion, which in the scope of his book means Christianity, fosters a "biblical" trust, that is, trust which inspires boldness and which is grounded in the experience of a community rather than simply in individual action.

This religious example, then, is just one of many initial contacts which Marty describes as the upward development of trust from the individual experience to the broadly shared experience of society, punctuated at various levels by specific interactions of trust and risk. Marty states that an individual learns first to trust himself or herself, then the "immediate others" on whom the individual, particularly as a child, depends. From this point, trust is further developed and reinforced through small groupings of individuals linked by interdependence and shared values, the "building blocks of society." Marty argues that it is these building blocks that must be emphasized and strengthened to best develop the large-scale culture of trust that he seeks.

Yet what about building trust in a society where subcultures have little shared history or where trust has badly eroded? For this, Dr. Marty looks to a variety of enlightenment and classical sources, particularly focusing on the enterprise of forming the United States, a process commonly held to have been a grand unified effort but which more recent scholarship has shown to have been made up of rather disparate interests. Success in America was, according to Marty, a result of individual willingness to acquiesce for the good of a common enterprise, a first step in creating a common story that could then be used

to unify the nation. And it is in common enterprise that institutions can begin to function as the "building blocks" of society.

As small subcultural and societal groups become larger and more complex, it is impossible to build trust in the interpersonal way it is first learned; instead, institutions take on a meaning, an expressed purpose, which transcends the individual such that, say, physicists or members of a certain religious denomination could meet other laborers in their field or member of their association and instantly have a basis of trust upon which to build a relationship. Eventually, these institutions come to represent mass constituencies based on shared goals, serving as repositories of transferred individual trust, and this is why Marty focuses on these "building blocks" as the important focus for building trust. They are the engines, the mitochondria converting interpersonal relationship-based trust relationships into common enterprise and a community-based trust. Then, through dialogue with each other, these institutions work together in building society.

So where does this leave us? Should this book be adopted by reading groups and used in classrooms to teach about trust? Despite all of the wonderful insight I gathered from this book, I would answer, "No." Marty's writing style tends to meander, and he often wanders afield before coming back to add further nuance to the topic. It is not a book which progresses systematically through a topic. It is the sort of book which must be swallowed whole and carefully digested before the best bits really start to come together. On my first reading, I took the book in smaller pieces, and I found that it was nearly impossible to really follow Marty's argument. On a second reading, I compressed my study down to a few days of more intensive study, and then I was treated to many more insights and connections than those that presented themselves in my first pass. This approach leads me to believe that the book is best suited for something like a graduate seminar, where deep reading on a compressed schedule is the norm. I would recommend the book more strongly to a person who has that sort of time for the endeavor.

Beyond a matter of taste in writing and argumentation style, I take issue with Dr. Marty's book in one other aspect. Throughout the book, Dr. Marty uses the debate between religion and science as a test case for his ideas about building cultures of trust, particularly in how these two groups come together in the public square. The debate pops up in smaller bits, but eventually Marty makes it apparent that he does not believe that conservative Protestants have a place at the table for fruitful dialogue because they have repeatedly rejected the "well-founded theory of evolution." My problem is not so much that I disagree with Dr. Marty; my training is in legal, not scientific, fields. My problem is with the nature of the argument that Marty seems to accept in reaching this conclusion. Marty makes much of philosopher Michael Oakeshott's "modes of thinking" (something like worldview). In Oakeshott's view (as

explained by Marty) conversation breaks down when one mode of thinking makes a “category mistake” and tries to speak authoritatively about another mode. Marty seems to buy the argument that while religion and science may be complementary in terms of developing a more fully-orbed understanding of the world, they are radically divorced ways of seeing and understanding the world, ways that seem to hold dominion in separate worlds from each other. That is, religion is a practical mode of thinking which has little to do with the quantitative measure of the universe that science develops.

The problem with this view is that it also divorces religion from history, another mode of thinking more related to science in Oakeshott’s philosophy. While Marty isn’t ready to cede to science’s denial of a virgin birth, he does dismiss ideas of something like a six-day creation as a form of category mistake. That is, when science, which is good at explaining processes, speaks to origins, religion, which is good at explaining purposes, should be silent. This is similar to the mistake of Friedrich Schleiermacher, the liberal theologian who jettisoned the historical nature of the Christian faith in his efforts to reconcile the debate

between faith and reason. The Bible is certainly not a textbook, but it is a covenant document based on a historical relation between God and His people, anchored in the declaration of a historical resurrection. It is one thing to resolve the Genesis debate by appealing to reasons why the text may not be literal, but the debate is between both science and Scripture speaking to history. By Marty’s own line of thought, it seems to me to be a category mistake to presume that science lays the only valid claim to the issue. I applaud much of what Marty lays as a groundwork for fostering conversation between science and religion, but I see no reason for excluding assumptions about origins from that conversation.

Overall, then, this is a book woven through with a consideration of the nature of trust which sparkles with brilliance and insight, although it is hampered at times by a meandering focus and some problematic assumptions. This book is decidedly not a “how to” manual on building cultures of trust, but, as a book which equips readers with a toolset to go about that task on their own, this book is a vital and valuable resource.