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Christian People Across the Centuries (Book Reviews)

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pieces of welfare-reform legislation.

Christians should be concerned, as we are called to care for the “least of these” (Matthew 25.40) and more specifically called numerous times to care for the “widow and the orphan” (James 1.27). Those involved in Early Childhood Education as well as those concerned with all issues relating to social justice should be spurred by Polakow’s book to advocate for women and especially children suffering from a system that leaves them without the help they need.

While Polakow is explicit about what is currently wrong with the system, she neglects to follow a particular rule that is familiar to many of those who conduct needs assessments—searching for strengths that currently exist in the childcare system. Is there something in our current system worth salvaging and building on? Perhaps the reason she mentions no strengths is that there are none.

Polakow does discuss three current proposals in response to these shortcomings, but she herself admits that these proposals are expensive and difficult to get through the legislative process, especially when it comes to financing (177-184). Though the three proposals she mentions may have their flaws, they are a good starting point for all of us to begin the discourse on this topic. It is hard

to imagine that the childcare system is or will be handled by the current administration any time soon, with issues of healthcare, defense, and homeland security seeming to dominate much of the time and money available. It is not difficult to see, however, how investing money in our country’s children will actually save taxpayers money down the road. But more importantly, ensuring that every child in this country has safe, stable, and quality child care and early-childhood education may have ramifications for health care and security for us all. *Who Cares for Our Children?* secures not only the health and well-being of that society but also its heart.

Endnotes

1. See S. Hays, *Flat Broke with Children: Women in the Age of Welfare Reform* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).
2. See “Hunger and Homelessness Up Sharply in Major U.S. Cities” in *The United States Conference of Mayors*. U.S Conference of Mayors, 12 Dec. 2001 Web. 1 Feb 2010.

Christian People Across the Centuries. Richard A. Horsley (editor), *Christian Origins*; Virginia Burrus (editor), *Late Ancient Christianity*; and Derek Krueger (editor), *Byzantine Christianity*, Volumes 1, 2 and 3 of *A People’s History of Christianity*, Denis R. Janz (General Editor). Minneapolis MN: Fortress Press, 2005, 2005 and 2006, respectively. ISBN: 0-8006-3411-X, -3412-8, and -3413-6. Reviewed by Keith Sewell, Professor of History, Dordt College.

In 1874 John Richard Green (1837-83) published his *Short History of the English People*, which he promptly followed up with his multi-volume *A History of the English People* (1878-80). Green’s work was an influential landmark in the emergence of modern social historiography. “The people” certainly emerged more fully in the nineteenth century. William Ewart Gladstone (1809-98) became known as “the People’s William.” For his part, Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920) referred respectfully to the “ordinary people” (*de kleine luyden*), who gave him their support, and he was not beyond learning central truths from a resolute Pietje Balthus, an unaffected farmer’s wife.

There was something new in this emergence of “the people.” The great historical writers of the Italian renaissance—such as Leonardo di Bruni (1369-1444) and Francesco Guicciardini (1483-1540)—although they referred to “the people,” perhaps inevitably concentrated on the holders and users of power. Among such writers the influence of classical Greek and Roman models reigned supreme. Only in the succeeding centuries, and not least arising from the subtler influences of Protestantism, did something like “public opinion” and “the voice of the people” become more pronounced. However, it is at just

this later stage of the story that we must pause to make two cautionary points.

Firstly, much history-writing, following in the footsteps of giants such as Leopold von Ranke (1795-1886), has continued to focus on the actions of elites. This was and is understandable because historiography addresses how we use (and misuse), generation by generation, the power that has been given us to form and shape human culture, and rightly or wrongly, a great deal of that power is in the hands of elites.

Secondly, the old-style scholastic theologies of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, both Catholic and Protestant—with all their architectonic-systematic refinements—were not equipped to address the great unfolding of science and society that took place in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The result was an absence of an adequately articulated Christian view of society. Therefore, when a historiography of society and the so-called “ordinary people” emerged, it tended to reflect the ways in which secularist and materialistic ideologies of the Enlightenment and French Revolution had come to shape social and economic thinking.

This tendency helps to explain why, although

the writing of social history made great strides in the twentieth century, the development nevertheless came with repeated challenges from traditionalists. There were recurrent confrontations between “history from above”—the historiography of elite action in the tradition of von Ranke—and “history from below”—often, but not inevitably, reflective of collectivist democratic ideologies. Some represented social history as “history with the politics left out,” while witty traditionalists asserted that it was “history with the history left out”—and with a great deal of ideology inserted. All the same, “history from below” has not withered away but has become organized, frequently in an ideologically laden manner, around the foci of “class” and “gender”—often with “race” included for good measure. In not a few contemporary secular university history departments a pronounced orientation around this triad of priorities is *de rigueur*.

So, as we pick up these three initial volumes of *A People's History of Christianity*, we must ask this question: “Is this history of Christian people shaped by the secular ideologies that have also formed social theory and much of the writing of social history in the twentieth-century?” In the case of these volumes the question must be answered with care. As each volume contains more than ten contributions from different authors, there is inevitably a certain unevenness in pace and tone. In their introductory contributions, Richard Horsley (1: 1-5, 11-20), and Virginia Burrus with Rebecca Lyman (2: 2-19), all signal their awareness of the question. For this reviewer, the overall tenor reflects the contemporary “class” and “gender” prioritizations, for example, in discussions of social stratification among Christians (1: 140-3; 178-80, 2: 22-68, 3: 9-11), or the position of Christian women in the ancient church (1: 270-86, 2: 181-9, 3: 201-20), but it does not lapse into ideologically over-loaded polemic. Twenty-first century “class” and “gender” prioritizations sometimes seem to hover in the text, but not so obtrusively as to negate the usefulness—and at some points fascination—of these volumes.

Certainly, some readers will be discomfited by the tone set by William R. Herzog's “Why Peasants Responded to Jesus” (v. 1, 47-70). Those committed to a version of the faith characterized by other-worldly spirituality will find this contribution difficult to take because it effectively drives us towards the original socio-economic context of Christ's teaching. It offers a strong explanation of how he was heard. In this respect it is valuable. Yet it is necessary to say much more. The gospels are clear that Jesus was often

misunderstood, even by his own disciples. It is necessary to keep in view that the kingdom of heaven was not to be some restoration of a past Mosaic or Davidic order. Moreover, depictions of Jesus as a rebel need to be handled with great care. He was not, after all, yet another Barabbas.

Jesus was not offering a Davidic-restoration-liberationist alternative *within* the prevailing system, but proclaiming a regime of deliverance and renewal *from* that entire system. In that respect he was doubly-dangerous to the Jewish and Roman systems alike. He had to die—and thereby came the deliverance! An analysis of Jesus' ministry and earliest Christianity that is too exclusively oriented towards the main-line social science priorities of “class and gender” can be problematic because they can lead us to seriously underestimate just how radical the announced kingdom is to be: a kingdom that is *for* this world while not *of* this world.

As a counter-part and cross-check to histories of Christianity that focus on the “big names,” these volumes are invaluable. Together they constitute a wide-ranging array of important secondary source materials and should not be ignored by either students of history or seminarians. The influences of contemporary secular social-science theory should not preclude our reading these works, even as they serve to confirm the ever-present need for discernment. And there are some little gems here. For example, those who recall John Calvin's respect for Chrysostom will appreciate Jaclyn Maxwell's contribution on “Lay Piety in the Sermons of John Chrysostom,” with its references to the Christianization of culture and encouragement of public righteousness (3: 19-38).

We need accounts of the lives, thoughts, and actions of those Christian men and women who were not the big leaders and prominent authors—especially for eras prior to the eighteenth century. Yet we need more. Those who set out to write the history of Christianity “from below” can still be laboring under the pull of an “above” and “below” polarity. We need a more integral history-writing that will dispense with the “above” and “below” bifurcation. Arguably this distinction, when now made in “Christian” discourse, arises from the historical juncture in the fourth century at which Christianity itself became aligned with empire, power and privilege. We still have to grapple adequately with the transformations that we associate with Constantine, Eusebius and Theodosius—all “big names.” We are left wrestling with the question of how all that has followed relates to the message of Jesus that those distant “ordinary folk” heard so gladly (Mark 12.37).