
Pro Rege

Volume 11 | Number 4

Article 8

June 1983

Religious Right and Christian Faith (Book Review)

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Recommended Citation

Van Til, Nick (1983) "Religious Right and Christian Faith (Book Review)," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 11: No. 4, 35 - 36.
Available at: http://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol11/iss4/8

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A quarterly faculty publication of
Dordt College, Sioux Center, Iowa

Mollenkott, Virginia R. *Speech, Silence, Action! The Cycle of Faith*. One of the Journeys in Faith Series, R.A. Raines, Editor. Abingdon: Nashville, 1980. Reviewed by Gloria G. Stronks.

The Journeys-in-Faith book series was planned to provide reflections on the faith journeys of Christians who have moved through the social-justice openings of the 1960s, the inward searching of the 1970s, and are looking toward a fresh integration of the faith journey for the years ahead. As a writer in this series, Virginia Mollenkott, author and Professor of English at William Patterson College, agreed to share the patterns she has seen in her own faith and life development. She also described issues which have become primary in her life.

Mollenkott carries out this task by tracing her development during the past fifteen years, away from an almost entire focus on words, books, and ideas into a time of learning about the necessity for including periods of silence and periods of action in her life. She describes her present life as moving from speech, to silence, to action in a constantly cyclical direction.

The author lived the first twenty-five years of her life in a strong fundamentalist environment and writes of appreciation for the thorough grounding in the surface facts of the Bible, received in the Plymouth Brethren Assemblies. Because women in that communion were not permitted to pray aloud or to ask questions at Bible interpretative sessions, she attempted to study the Bible by memorizing passages of Scripture. She did not encounter Scripture scholarship concerning the canon, the texts, and the historical milieu until she began working on her doctoral dissertation on Milton. In the present book she traces her journey into scholarship, following the practice of subjecting everything to the final authority of Scripture. This practice has caused some readers to suggest that she is unable to make a complete break from the teachings of her youth while others, who would agree most with submission of self to biblical norms, regard her as a flaming radical. Her writings concerning her belief that the Bible teaches the mutual subjection of husband and wife to each other, that

Christians are to respond humanely to homosexual persons in the light of modern scientific understandings, and her claim that study of Scripture leads to a global vision of human justice, dignity, and oneness have led her to warn readers away from far-right leaders like Phyllis Schlafly, Anita Bryant, Marabel Morgan, or Bill Gothard. Regarding topics such as language and imagery about God, obesity, the polarity of art and technology, she demonstrates a biblically based concern for social relationships.

It was a wonderful experience to read about the faith journey of someone whose writings I have so much admired. When Mollenkott explains, rather apologetically, the reasons behind her slow evolution in coming to understand the implications for social justice in the gospel, I am less grieved about my own. When she describes her difficulties in maintaining a proper balance between too actively working out her conclusions and finding too little time for growing and deepening through reading and supportive conversation, I recognize the weak places in my own life. And that, I believe, is the value of reading about someone else's faith journey.

The theme of the book centers on the interrelationship between speech, silence, and action. In speech, Christians inform themselves of the injustices that exist. In silence they ask God to clarify within them an agenda for action, and then they actively move forward in a global battle against injustice. Readers might object to the direction Mollenkott has taken in her own personal battle against injustice, but for men and women who are trying to get in touch with the dynamics of their own faith journey and that of others, this book provides an example of one individual's movement away from a judgmental spirit toward a spirit of compassion.

Other contributors to this series include Robert McAfee Brown, Mary Luke Tobin, and Martin E. Marty.

Gabriel Fackre, *The Religious Right & Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1982) xiii, 126 pages. Reviewed by Nick Van Til, Professor of Philosophy, Emeritus.

Concerning this little book Senator Mark Hatfield writes,

... an incisive theological analysis of the fuzzy thinking of our age. Everyone, from left to right, who desires to sift through the strewn ideological landscape of the last twenty-five years and who wants to contribute to the present dialogue should own this book.

Senator Hatfield's recommendation may be enough for some, but as Hatfield himself is a controversial

figure, others may not accept his judgment. I would like to invite the reader to a sampler of Fackre's opinions.

From the first two chapters, "The Spectrum of Politics and Piety" and especially "The Historical Setting of the Religious Right," Fackre wants us to understand that "Religious Right" is the correct designation. This is so because The Moral Majority invites the support of anyone who can support the Judeo-Christian ethos as Jerry Falwell interprets it, whether Moslem, Jew, or Christian.

Following the introductory chapters, Fackre discusses in sequence the position of the Religious Right on the

following topics and gives his assessment: "Sources and Norms of Authority," "Creation," "Fall," "Covenant," "Jesus Christ," "Church," "Salvation," "Consummation," and "God." The reader will find Fackre's format convenient as in each case he states the position of the Religious Right and then follows it with the assessment of what he considers the view of "Classical Christianity" with a section headed "Yes" and a section headed "No."

For example, under the heading "Creation" in his "Yes" section Fackre writes in part,

On the explicit doctrine of human nature, the Religious Right is faithful to the Christian teaching regarding both the creatureliness of human beings and the divine image in them. The assertion that Adam—humankind—is unique with creation is an indisputable article of faith. (p. 40)

Under "No" in his criticism Fackre writes,

In the way it distributes both moral expectations and moral censure, the Religious Right addresses the self as if it were a pure spirit with no supportive or inhibiting physical connectedness. There is no recognition that the privileges of the healthy and the rich grant them a freedom not enjoyed by the poor, whose ability to choose is constricted by the social and economic factors which affect their finitude. Here is a profound and critical failure to see that humans live at the "juncture of nature and spirit" and not in the realm of pure spirit. (p. 44)

In his discussion of "Consummation," that is, the beliefs and doctrines concerning the second coming of Christ, Fackre compliments the Religious Right in that "the movements of history are taken with high

seriousness" (p. 91). But the Moral Majority with its incessant attacks on secular humanism may be surprised to find that Fackre finds it guilty of secularizing tendencies. Fackre writes, and I think correctly,

When the apocalyptic of the Religious Right attempts to identify events in history as eschatology, a form of secular forecasting is substituted for the eschatology of a transformed creation, which puts an end to the secular realm as such. Ironically, this secularization in eschatology is akin to the secularized humanisms, with their predictions of either heaven or hell in history, their forecasts of a millennial kingdom of peace and the end of class warfare or an Armageddon-like nuclear or ecological disaster. (p. 95)

In his "Conclusion" Fackre writes, and again I tend to agree,

The implicit secular humanism of the Religious Right which imports partisan political judgments and culture-bound morés into the proclamation of the gospel, is as anthropocentric as the explicitly self-congratulatory humanism of the secular left. The "perspective" we have seen at work in many points of Christian doctrine—not all by any means—rises out of one sector of contemporary secular experience, the politics and culture of the right. It is processed through a small, hospitable sector of ecclesial experience. Finally it takes charge of the purported biblical source and norm through a highly selective use and interpretation of texts. (p. 105)

You may or may not agree with all of Fackre's assessments but I think you will find this little work to be highly informative and useful as a handy reference.