

Grasso, Kenneth L. and Robert P. Hunt, editors. *A Moral Enterprise: Politics, Reason, and the Human Good (Essays in Honor of Francis Canavan)*. Wilmington, Delaware: ISI Books, 2002. 425 pp. \$29.95 hardcover.

Francis Canavan, S.J., perhaps is known best as the author of three important books on the founder of modern conservatism, Edmund Burke. He has written lucid and penetrating studies of Burke's epistemology, theology and political economy. This in itself makes Canavan an important scholar, who has enriched our understanding of politics and the bases of ordered liberty. But Canavan's contributions extend beyond his work specifically on Burke. In books like *The Pluralist Game: Pluralism, Liberalism and the Moral Conscience* (1995) and *Freedom of Expression: Purpose as Limit* (1984), along with scores of essays and reviews, Canavan has explored the relationship between faith and reason, state and society, morality and political action. Among his most consistent themes has been the necessity of clear thinking concerning what we ought to value if politics in to ennoble rather than degrade us.

Co-editor Kenneth Grasso builds on Canavan's insight in an essay on enlightenment liberalism and the current, manic concern with individual rights. Grasso emphasizes, not the limits of rights merely, but, more important, rights' proper grounding and purpose. It is not liberalism's recognition of human rights, grounded after all in a Christian emphasis on the dignity of the human person, which leads to social chaos. It is liberalism's reduction of the naturally social and purposeful human person to a mere "sovereign self" consumed by the pursuit of groundless "choices" that breaks down society and leaves us at the mercy of our passions and the passions of competing mobs.

This comprehensive and wide-ranging collection is a fitting tribute to a scholar of Canavan's stature and breadth of concern. It includes important discussions (several

explicitly building on Canavan's analyses) concerning Burke, the character of right action in public life, the relationship between religion and politics, the nature and limits of pluralism, the role of natural law in developing standards of human conduct and the role of the courts in contemporary public life.

All these essays concern topics on which Canavan has made important observations. This is not to say that they are univocal in tenor or intent. Indeed, it adds to the volume's interest that some contributors write at cross-purposes with Canavan. Thomas Spragens, for example, sees himself as pursuing a balanced approach to religious expression, insisting that reasoning based in religious morality should be allowed in public debates. That balance is not achieved, however, is shown by Spragens' rejection of any expectation that "secular public institutions [should] serve as agencies of religious socialization and that includes the inculcation of moral norms distinctive to or predicated upon religious commitments" (175). Assumptions underlying this statement are telling: that there are, in fact, publicly available and sustainable nonreligious grounds for morality; that all public institutions outside the church are or ought to be utterly "secular," and that any penetration of the public sphere by religion constitutes violation of a supposedly sacred separation of church and state.

We are left, then, with the liberal vision of religion as one voice among many that may be expressed in public, but is to be acted upon substantively only in the confines of an unremittingly separate and private religious ghetto. Thus we see that, as Canavan repeatedly has pointed out, the liberal claim to moral neutrality masks the imposition of liberal morality. In his own thoughtful essay, Gerard Bradley cites Canavan's observation that "political issues" by nature raise "moral questions that must be answered

in the light of some conception of human nature, its basic needs, and its common social welfare” (188).

Liberals reject meaningful discussion of religious issues on the ground that they produce great violence. Liberal history (as recounted, for example, in the essay by Harry Jaffa in this collection) tells a story in which the West was torn apart by religiously-grounded war and political oppression until the Enlightenment ushered in a time of a-religious rationality. In an essay in this volume on “The Evolution of Catholic Social Thought,” Gerald A McCool, S.J. points out the fallacious nature of this history. It was not the Church’s authority, but its loss (or in some cases ceding) of authority to the state during the early modern era that produced absolutism and almost ceaseless war, carried on in the name of religion but almost exclusively in pursuit of material and political ends. Gallicanism and its Protestant twins in England and much of Germany reduced the Church’s capacity to serve as a counterweight to political power, breaking down the limits on royal authority constructed so laboriously in the wake of the Investiture Crisis.

Ironically, Jaffa’s essay, on “The False Prophets of American Conservatism,” illustrates the problem laid out by McCool. Jaffa argues that the natural law tradition is encapsulated in the prefatory sentences of the Declaration of Independence. All we need to know about natural law is contained in these few phrases, and anyone who rejects their sovereign status thereby rejects natural law. This ideological reductionism in effect rejects the religious principles, legal and political traditions and communalist history through which constitutional government and Catholic social thought developed. It makes equality of rights the sole ground of legitimate political life, rendering higher goals (and salvation in particular) politically irrelevant. Thus religion becomes a mere tool to

be used by those in power to serve their own political ends; ends which, today, are hostile toward any religious understanding of the good of the community and of the human person.

The strength of Jaffa's argument lies in the seeming legitimacy it lends judges seeking to "do justice" in ways not grounded in constitutional texts. This modern tendency is the subject of George Carey's typically lucid essay, which shows how jurists' claim to direct knowledge of natural law has destroyed constitutional government as instituted by the founders. Dispensing with America's traditional constitutional morality – rooted in centuries-long traditions of restraint, textualism and adherence to original intent – judges have established themselves as unlimited rulers, justifying their usurpations through an ideology of progress that mimics as it undermines natural law.

As Canavan has pointed out, we cannot achieve the perfect society in this life. We often must settle for the least bad alternative in public life, even where important moral concerns are at stake. We must accept the limits of a true pluralism, rooted in the multiplicity of authorities provided by limited government, while arguing for a robust religion active throughout our public life. The liberal alternative, empowering a privileged elite to formulate and apply abstract principles to society's varying circumstances, can only bring political and spiritual disaster.

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