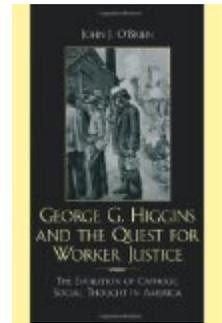


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

John J. O'Brien. *George G. Higgins and the Quest for Worker Justice: The Evolution of Catholic Social Thought in America*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005. xv + 397 pp. \$32.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7425-3208-3; \$102.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7425-3207-6.

Reviewed by Nicholas Rademacher (The Catholic University of America)
Published on H-Catholic (August, 2006)



Higgins's Contribution to Catholic Social Thought

John J. O'Brien studies Monsignor George G. Higgins's contribution to Catholic social thought by investigating his *Labor Day Statements* over the period 1946-2001 and his *Yardstick* columns from 1945-94. This investigation is placed within the context of "civil religion" in the United States, which is defined in chapter 1. O'Brien quotes Robert N. Bellah to define the term: "Civil religion at its best is a genuine apprehension of universal and transcendent religious reality as seen in or ... as revealed through the experience of the American people" (p. 4, ellipsis in O'Brien). He then traces civil religion in the United States from the founding fathers to modern times. In terms of the Catholic contribution, O'Brien emphasizes the use of public theology and natural law theory as an attempt to avoid sectarianism. Catholics have employed the natural law, O'Brien explains, "to engage in public discourse, which has enabled it to reach the widest possible public, to dialogue with a wide variety of thinkers and policy makers, and to avoid sectarian thinking" (p. 15). To this approach, Higgins contributed the term "economic citizenship." The following passage captures what Higgins meant by the term: "Economic citizenship requires a voice in the decisions that shape your life and your livelihood—a voice in your job, your community and your country. Economic citizenship requires a sense of recognition and respect—for the work you do, the contribution you make and your inherent dignity as a child of God" (p. 16).

A biographical sketch of Higgins is provided in the second chapter. It is worth noting that, in his early days,

Higgins was exposed to the thought of Virgil Michel, the founder of the liturgical movement and an accomplished social theorist in his own right. As a young man, Higgins read Michel's work and learned about the close relationship between the liturgy and social action, as well as the fundamental importance of personal sanctification of every Christian as a means of effecting social change. Similar ideas would have been communicated to Higgins at St. Mary's Seminary in Chicago, where Reynold Hillenbrand linked liturgical reform with the social apostolate. Although exposed to these ideas, John A. Ryan, whose approach to social reform emphasized legislation and unionization, had a more profound effect on Higgins's developing social thought. Higgins studied under Ryan at The Catholic University of America (CUA). Higgins's Master's thesis was on Ryan's under-consumption theory and his doctoral dissertation traced the development of trade unionism over a ten-year period, 1930-40 (p. 21). Subsequent to his graduation, Higgins worked with Raymond McGowan, Ryan's successor at the Social Action Department (SAD) of the National Catholic Welfare Conference (NCWC). In this position, under the guidance of McGowan, Higgins carried on Ryan's project.

Also in chapter 2, O'Brien thoroughly reviews the history of work in the United States from the late nineteenth century and the foundations of American Catholic social thought. The reader is provided with a succinct summary of the Catholic Church's relationship with labor in America—from the Knights of Labor, Cardinal Gibbons's intervention on the Knights' behalf, and Leo

XIII's *Rerum Novarum*. The reader learns about particular Catholic responses to *Rerum Novarum* in the United States and the work of various activist priests and laypeople. Additionally, O'Brien covers the Bishops' 1919 letter on social reconstruction and the foundation of the NCWC and SAD. In an otherwise hostile environment, the Church wished to prove its commitment to the United States in language that would not alienate Protestant compatriots. The institutional structures erected during this period and the natural law philosophy that accompanied it served this purpose. Higgins shared this outlook. His emphasis, when it came to the SAD, was on pushing for structural reform in language accessible to all Americans.

Higgins made his contribution through his syndicated *Yardstick* columns and his *Labor Day Statements*. In chapters 3 and 4, O'Brien summarizes Higgins's social vision by systematically treating these writings from the "early years" (1945-62) and the "mature years" (1963-80) of his social apostolate. Throughout these decades, Higgins remained committed to unionization, fought for structural changes that would eliminate poverty and unemployment as well as racial and religious discrimination, and favored cooperation between organized labor, management, consumers, and the government. He challenged both big business and organized labor to be accountable to the public. O'Brien treats the impact of Vatican II on Higgins's thought by considering specifically "the apostolate of the laity; the church in the modern world; religious liberty; and Catholic-Jewish relations" (p. 113). O'Brien covers Higgins's role in the United Farm Workers ordeal. Through his *Yardstick* columns, Higgins reported on the situation of Mexican workers on U.S. farms. Higgins believed that they were being exploited under the guest worker agreement entered into by the U.S. Federal Government and Mexico. Additionally, Higgins believed that the exploitation of Mexican labor led to lower wages and insufficient benefits for domestic workers. O'Brien describes Higgins's contribution to the movement as follows: "His moral stature in the church and organized labor, spiritual presence as a priest and man of integrity, and practical skills in analysis and labor-management negotiations enabled him to collaborate with those who had been, for far too long, politically and economically unrepresented" (pp. 155-156).

Chapter 5 treats Higgins's later years, 1981-94, which entailed a continued commitment to social justice, in the context of that period, such as battling the Reagan administration on key labor issues. He argued that Reagan's economic plan would hurt the poor and, naturally,

he opposed Reagan's response to the 1981 air traffic controller's strike. During this period, Higgins supported the solidarity movement in Poland. Chapter 6, the conclusion, summarizes Higgins's contribution. As a journalist he educated the public on social issues; as a social teacher, Higgins instructed his readership in "the dignity of the human person, the common good, the desire to build community, and participation in decision making" (p. 204); and O'Brien concludes that Higgins, as a priest, served as an exemplary model by his support of lay service, his dedication to the social apostolate through which he cared for the poor, and his attempt to link liturgy and social action.

The linkage between the liturgy and social action is one point among many where Higgins departed from the natural law position that characterized his work over the course of his career. O'Brien also indicates Higgins's use of the Mystical Body of Christ imagery, a distinctive theological anthropology, and the theological categories of sin, grace, and redemption. These two aspects, the natural law approach and the theological approach, seem to be in tension in Higgins's work, which raises certain questions. Is it the case that Higgins reduced theological categories and the Church's sacramental life to the support of the labor movement cause? And if so, where does one stand vis-à-vis the Church if one does not think that the "labor movement" (as Higgins defined it and advocated for it) is the best method for social reconstruction?

The names Virgil Michel, Peter Maurin, and Dorothy Day appear at various times throughout this book. It is important to observe the radical difference between their approach and Higgins's approach. The focus of the former was personal sanctification and personal transformation as the fundamental way to reconstruct society. Though he acknowledged the need for moral reform through the guidance of the Bible, the sacraments, and the practice of the spiritual and corporal works of mercy, Higgins favored structural change first. By attacking the most pressing problems of the day—racism and poverty—in an idiom recognizable to a wide American audience, Higgins could not have instituted the type of long-lasting change that is necessary to usher in the type of society that he envisioned (especially one like unto the "Mystical Body of Christ"). Michel and Day, the former an influence on and the second an ally of Higgins, were able to connect personal reform with structural reform without neglecting either one.

The tradition of Catholic social thought emphasizes both the use of pure reason, as in the natural law tradi-

tion, and the role of the supernatural life, as in the sacraments and divine revelation. Like many mainstream social justice advocates, Higgins emphasized the papal call for reform based on the natural law without sufficiently developing the significance of the Church's supernatural life. In Higgins's work, the spiritual life seems ancillary to the work of structural reform. There does not seem to be any emphasis on prayer or the sacraments as a necessary precursor or at least an essential contemporaneous means to social reform. The sacraments of initiation, the sacrament of penance, and the liturgy are fundamental aspects of social reform from a Catholic point of view, as Dorothy Day and Virgil Michel, to cite two examples from Higgins's own life, make plain. If there is a deficiency in Higgins's project, his failure to more fully articulate the supernatural aspect of Catholic social reform theory may be it. However, it is explained when viewed against the backdrop of American "civil religion" and the natural law trajectory of Catholic social

thought onto which Higgins latched in order to mediate the Catholic vision to his pluralistic context.

John J. O'Brien's book *George G. Higgins and the Quest for Worker Justice* is a valuable resource for its treatment of civil religion and the overview of Catholic social teaching that it provides. It is an indispensable review of Higgins's work across the decades of his social apostolate. The book is clearly written and contains ample notes, a rich bibliography, and eight useful appendixes. The book will appeal to the reader who seeks an introduction to the labor movement in the United States. Teachers of Catholic social thought will find the book useful in the classroom as a way to introduce students to the development of public theology in the United States from the Great Depression to the late twentieth century. At the same time, scholars of Catholic labor history will find it useful as a thorough treatment of Higgins's vision as it unfolded across his entire career.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-catholic>

Citation: Nicholas Rademacher. Review of O'Brien, John J., *George G. Higgins and the Quest for Worker Justice: The Evolution of Catholic Social Thought in America*. H-Catholic, H-Net Reviews. August, 2006.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=12112>

Copyright © 2006 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.