

The contention that God's purposes in the world have hitherto been thwarted by our failure to "enact" the Sermon on the Mount as a political-economic experiment, for example, would seem to be simply another "health and wealth gospel," though admittedly in a Left-liberal form. And so, although we should certainly be suspicious of economic motives and interests, particularly when it comes to ecclesial practice, *Christianity Incorporated* is not a particularly good example of how this suspicion can be made to bear real fruit.

—Craig M. Gay
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Liberty, Wisdom, and Grace: Thomism and Democratic Political Theory

John P. Hittinger

Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2002 (314 pages)

This book is the seventeenth volume in the publisher's distinguished series, Applications of Political Theory. It is a topical rather than a systematic collection of essays spanning twenty years of writing and teaching. Its purpose is to bring philosophy and religion, broadly understood, to bear upon contemporary issues in American public life, principally the meaning and experience of freedom. The author, a professor of philosophy at Sacred Heart Seminary in Detroit, is establishing a scholarly reputation as a critic of contemporary liberal thought.

Considered as a whole, these essays provide a comprehensive survey of the political thought of recent Thomistic philosophers, Jacques Maritain—the book's central figure—and his colleague, Yves Simon, principally their understanding of the theory and practice of modern democracy. Secondly, Hittinger considers other thinkers in the classical tradition (Leo Strauss and John Paul II). The author also uses the occasion to treat some philosophical critics of the classical tradition (principally Aurel Kolnai) and the opposing Lockean tradition as represented by several constitutional scholars.

An autobiographical preface sketches the heritage that informs the author's thought and sets forth his personal, political, academic, and religious credentials for undertaking these studies. He does not mention a noble feature, which this reviewer counts among Hittinger's principal distinctions—the gifts of common sense, intellectual simplicity, and plain speaking, which manifest his Hoosier origins and his upbringing in the Virginia Tidewater.

The book's sixteen essays are presented under three broad headings: (1) The response of Maritain and Simon to the political crisis of the twentieth century; (2) the contrasting views of liberty and democracy in the Aristotelian-Thomistic and Lockean traditions; and (3) the treasure of wisdom and grace that the author has found in his mentors, which include—along with Maritain, Simon, Strauss, and John Paul II—John Henry Newman, Flannery O'Connor, Marion Montgomery, and James Schall. Mont-

gomery has provided the phrase, “the very graciousness of being,” which comes close to describing the purpose of this book (ix).

In remarks providing a Foreword, Father Schall portrays the author as heir and transmitter of a tradition that is continually in danger of submersion under the superficial and sometimes dishonest scholarship churned up by a hostile cultural and ideological environment. Hittinger regards with a sense of family honor the tradition that he defends and enhances in light of certain inadequacies that recent developments have brought to light. As he puts it, with characteristic succinctness, the world and especially our country have gone in a different direction from the one that Maritain and his colleagues did their best to point out. Hittinger considers it a humbling privilege to accept his generational duty to perpetuate and strengthen the family line that those philosophers did so much to enrich.

The author finds a wonderful convergence between that intellectual patrimony and his own family’s background—especially its military distinctions across several generations in defense of our foundational principles and its open-eyed recognition under our dominant Protestant culture of the original Catholic inspiration of those principles. This latter trait suggests why Hittinger chose for his mentors other converts famous for blunt and carefully argued positions (Newman, O’Connor, Montgomery).

Hittinger’s characteristic facility for seeing “where ideas go” (Schall’s expression) also helps to understand his choice of adversaries who are guilty of doing their best to bastardize that patrimony. Their names are not the ones whom most students of these matters would identify as the culprits chiefly responsible for distorting the American Founding, thereby causing serious deviations from the classical-Christian tradition in our contemporary political culture. The authors whom Hittinger has selected are chiefly David Richards, Edward Wilson, Richard Rorty, John Rawls, and Steven Hawking.

The ideological character of those thinkers and the legions like them who “reduce reality” to the dimensions of self-interested agendas is manifest, Father Schall suggests, in the “closed curricula” of our universities while unclouded openness to the world as it is, lies at the root of Maritain’s work and of Hittinger’s other mentors. As Schall points out, “The fault line of modern social thought runs through our theory of rights and hence our understanding of natural law and its foundations” (xv). While classical natural right is always linked to corresponding *duties*, the moderns ground it in *will* [italics mine]. Here is one area that Maritain left for his worthy successors to elaborate.

Hittinger is among the growing number of younger scholars, many of them associated with him in the American Maritain Association, who are hard at work on that project. One of America’s best friends from abroad, Maritain, is well-chosen as the centerpiece of this redemptive work because he took up all the questions associated with liberal democracy and traced them back to Aquinas (and thence, to the Bible and to Aristotle).

It should also be noted that Maritain (like Hittinger) was a layman fully at home in the world and was even (by his own admission) an “old layman” (in Maritain’s late

apologia pro vita sua)—not just “old” chronologically but consciously enshrining an enduring tradition capable of sustaining the high hopes of World War II-era philosophers for a new, democratic constitution for persons living in freedom.

John Hittinger is showing that the same is true in our post-cultural revolutionary era at the dawn of the twenty-first century, for our civic tradition cannot be correctly understood—and probably cannot survive—unless it is reconnected to classical metaphysics and Judeo-Christian revelation.

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Dreadful Conversions: The Making of a Catholic Socialist

John C. Cort

New York: Fordham University Press, 2003 (355 pages)

John Cort died in mid-2003 after nine decades of an active and concerned life, soon after publication of his autobiography. Cort was converted to Catholicism when an undergraduate at Harvard College. He early became involved in the Catholic Worker Movement led by ex-Communist Dorothy Day and French personalist Peter Maurin, whose work centered around Hospitality Houses for the homeless and a newspaper, *The Catholic Worker*.

Peter Maurin had been a Christian Brother, teaching in elementary schools in Paris, but after conscription in the French army, he did not take final vows but joined a Christian youth movement. Looking for leadership from Christianity, Maurin had a profound distrust of coercive entities from trade unions to the welfare state. Peter Maurin was said by the editor of the Jesuit magazine, *America*, Father Wilfrid Parsons, to be the best-read man he had ever met. Maurin was inspired by authors devoted to individual freedom and decentralized political society: Nicholas Berdyaev, Peter Kropotkin, Hilaire Belloc, Jacques Maritain, and Christopher Dawson.

The Catholic Worker Movement has inspired many young idealists, such as John Cort, as well as Catholic clergy, although not many bishops until Cardinals Terrence Cooke and John O'Connor of New York, the latter of whom proposed Dorothy Day for canonization (1997). Dorothy Day died November 29, 1980, at the age of eighty-three. Peter Maurin died in 1949; a successor was Ammon Henneey, who lived and lectured on their shared ideals of pacifism and decentralism.

John Cort writes: “I was convinced of the truth of Lord Acton’s aphorism about the corrupting effect of power, and surely there could be no greater concentration of power in the world than a U.S. government.... Here, again, I clashed with Peter. His gentle but rugged individualism could accept the spiritual discipline of the Catholic Church but not the temporal discipline of a trade union.” John Cort came from a post-Christian Social Gospel culture very different from the profoundly Catholic culture of Maurin’s study.