

Engagement in Breadth and Depth

Review of
Deep and Wide:

Reflections on Socio-Political Engagement, Monasticism(s) and the Christian Life
by Evan B. Howard

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Reviewed by **Paul R. Dekar**

Evan Howard, who teaches spirituality at Fuller Theological Seminary, takes as a “guiding image” for this excellent book the words of a children’s chorus by Sydney E. Cox (1887-1975), a Salvation Army major, evangelist and composer of around 400 songs. Howard describes the book as a “collection of reflections” on key practices of monks, nuns, new monastics and associates or visitors to monasteries. These include political self-examination, discernment, hospitality, a rule of life, doing politics the monastic way and praying the scriptures.

In the first chapter, Howard highlights the values that inform socio-political engagement by Christian monastics in general. These are care for creation, human dignity, freedom, justice, compassion, purity and holiness, as opposed to worldly conformity. In the chapters that follow, Howard introduces the new monastic movement, a trend anticipated by the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945), Thomas Merton (1915-1968) and others. A diverse movement that has arisen over the last few decades both in North America and more widely, the new monastics are offering a spiritual direction by which religious seekers may live out their faith intentionally in community. Unlike classical Christian monks and nuns, who take vows of celibacy, many new monastic communities include families. (For an introduction to the phenomenon, see: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Monasticism.) He explores how monks, nuns and especially “new monastics” speak, care and seek, through their communities, to offer a model for service towards the greater common good.

Howard’s basic assumption is that we are political people, and that politics is more than statecraft. This has implications for socio-political engagement. Howard identifies the promise of the new monasticism that now offers new possibilities for growth, nurture in community, prayer and action. When we understand that we are ordering our world in ordinary ways, in things apparently “slight and insignificant,” that politics is simply part of what we do all the time – touching us from different angles both deep and wide, and available for our engagement as our situation grants – we

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can begin to see that the possibilities for socio-political engagement are endless. I see this as both a grave challenge and a blessed invitation (175).

Reviewing this book in a publication devoted to the legacy of Thomas Merton, I note that *Deep and Wide* is replete with citations from Merton, notably his *Cold War Letters*. While he does not specifically refer to efforts to silence Merton in relation to socio-political issues, Howard would certainly have welcomed the September 24, 2015 address of Pope Francis to a joint session of the U.S. Congress, during which the pope mentioned Merton as a “source of spiritual inspiration and a guide for many people. . . . Merton was above all a man of prayer, a thinker who challenged the certitudes of his time and opened new horizons for souls and for the Church. He was also a man of dialogue, a promoter of peace between peoples and religions” (see Pope Francis, *Merton Annual* 28 [2015] 21).

Along with an extensive bibliography and an index of Biblical texts, Howard introduces and describes several groups that demonstrate “how Christian communities can model good society here and now” (111). He draws not only on his academic research and time in the classroom but on his practical experience as the founder and director of Spirituality Shoppe, a center for the study of Christian Spirituality in Colorado, and even on the contributions of his own family. He dedicates the book to his daughters Claire House and Terese Howard, each of whom became models and mentors in socio-political engagement, in community life and much more. In his concluding paragraph, Howard writes that God is raising up pockets of “semi-monastic Christians who will help one another face our own socio-political lives, discern our appropriate socio-political next step, and persevere in authentic socio-political engagement. Who will join?” (189).

I enjoyed reading this well-written, well-documented book. Perhaps my only quibble is his use of “semi-monastic” to characterize new monastic community members, many of whom see themselves as fully monastic. In the history of Catholic monasticism, the church recognized, in addition to monks and nuns, various “third orders” of laity who lived outside the walls of a monastery but observed monastic practices of prayer and service. Drawing on my own experience with a new monastic community, I resonate with insights drawn from Howard’s book, notably his emphasis that the movement offers new possibilities for growth, nurture in community, prayer and action. I trust that readers of this engaging book, especially those unfamiliar with monasticism, may well be led to visit a monastery or new monastic community.