

One New Book for the Preacher

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PUBLIC THEOLOGY AND POLITICAL ECONOMY: CHRISTIAN STEWARDSHIP IN MODERN SOCIETY. By Max L. Stackhouse. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987, 177 pages, \$8.95.

In this book an accomplished Christian ethicist outlines a theologically informed view of modern economic life. Max Stackhouse writes from an ecumenical or "mainline" Protestant perspective located between the extremes of fundamentalism and liberation theology. His text is aimed at a general audience, contains a minimum of jargon, and includes study questions at the close of each chapter.

Stackhouse believes that a primary task of Christian ethics is to articulate a "public theology"—one which interprets matters in the public domain (pp. 2, 17). His first chapter shows how scripture, tradition, reason, and experience function as sources of insight for such a theology. Chapters two through four discuss key theological themes, retrieve neglected contributions of figures like Shailer Mathews and Walter Rauschenbusch, and show the relevance of Max Weber's understanding of economy and society for Christian ethics. Chapters six through eight offer constructive interpretations of politics, the corporation, and technology. The book concludes with a chapter on the dynamics of pluralism and diversity in contemporary society.

For Stackhouse, religion has to do with piety or with a fabric of personally held commitments and beliefs. This fabric forms our basic vision of what is true, good, and right. Our vision, in turn, shapes our perspectives on institutions, national priorities, public policies, and so on. Thus, by articulating a basic religious vision in the form of a public theology, the Christian community may have an influence on the ethos of society and on society's varied institutions.

Take the modern corporation. Stackhouse maintains that the distinctive purpose of the corporation is to contribute to the material well-being of the human community, and that there are three main forms which corporations may assume: the *oikos* or household-based corporation, the state-engineered corporation, and the independent corporation. The *oikos*-based corporation, says Stackhouse, tends to support the formation of family elites, while state engineered corporations concentrate political and economic power in the hands of the government. We should favor the independent corporation because, in the long run, it is the social form most likely to support and sustain human rights, democratic participation in political life, and the reduction of feudal, patriarchal, and caste systems in family life.

Having made this choice, Stackhouse interprets the independent corporation and its dominant tendencies in greater detail. He says the theme of vocation, for example, means that both the particular skills and products of a corporation, as well as its profit-making capacity, need to be seen in terms of service to the wider community. A company whose services or products are shoddy fails in its responsibilities to consumers. An unprofitable company fails to uphold its responsibilities to employees and investors. Then, too, the theme of moral law reminds us that, if we fail to attend to basic principles of right and wrong, there is a tendency for corporate decisions simply to ratify whatever is expedient (p. 134).

Stackhouse also notes that millions of middle-class people in the west have found their economic liberation through corporate employment, though we need to recognize that corporations may tend simply to align themselves with the *status quo* when they move into regions dominated by family and military elites. So the theological theme of liberation encourages us to ask how corporate policies and projects may be framed in ways that contribute to the economic enfranchisement of people. The theme of sin alerts us to the fact that every pattern of distribution entails disproportionate gain for some at the expense of others, and that every pattern of consumption involves waste.

For these reasons political economies ought to be structured and regulated to restrain inordinate gain and inordinate waste. The theme of covenant means that we should try to structure economic activities through patterns that reflect what we have learned about distributions of power in the political arena. Corporate life should be oriented toward the sharing of power and participatory decision making in the setting of guidelines for policy. On these fronts, then, Stackhouse argues that Christian belief has something relevant to offer modern corporate life.

The uncluttered and accessible interpretation of the corporation is representative of the volume as a whole. Stackhouse favors a corporate capitalism within a democratic political context, and he presents his case in a manner that pastors and interested laypeople will find instructive. If you are looking for a solid, engaging text to use in a high-powered and inquisitive adult class, this book is a good bet.