

socialism. The evangelical and charismatic styles of Christianity, which are becoming more and more prevalent throughout the Pacific, seem to have been disregarded completely. Yet the “black theology”, represented at the conference by James Cone, has its roots in Pentecostalism, as does the Christian movement for the emancipation of women, ably advocated by Rosemary Reuther, Letty Russel, and Mercy Oduyoye. It was 19th-century evangelicals who agitated for humane working conditions, and the abolition of slavery. Why have evangelicals abandoned these positions to “ecumenicals”? Would not the EATWOT dialogue be more truly ecumenical if it paid more attention to the movement within evangelicalism to take social justice and dialogue of religions more seriously? Or would this compromise the very basis on which the Geneva meeting took place: the common commitment to expose the roots of poverty and injustice in the “social sin” of white racism, structural violence, and the oppression of women?

The time is coming for Melanesians to be involved in these difficult, but crucial, discussions. But, in order to make their own specific contribution, they must first know exactly where they stand, as Melanesians, and as Christians; their theology must be compatible with their identity. Those of them who tackle this book, with its bewildering variety of styles, standpoints, temperaments, and genres, will find much to challenge the way they see both themselves and the larger world.

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GNUSE, Robert, *You Shall Not Steal: Community Property in the Biblical Tradition*, Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1985, paperback US\$9.95, 162 pp.

In writing this book, Robert Gnuse very convincingly illustrates the role a biblical scholar can play in critiquing the contemporary syncretisms which distort original prophetic visions.

In this case, his central concern is the decalogue against stealing, as it is enshrined within the biblical tradition of the people of God. His assertion is that this law was never intended to protect the private

property of the wealthy, but rather, was meant to safeguard the rights, everyone in the community had, to acquire the basic needs for human living.

Through his thoroughly-documented arguments, the author issues a highly-relevant challenge to the deeply-ingrained Western assumption that property owners have an inalienable right to possessions, over against the legitimate human needs of the dispossessed.

His challenge takes up some of the issues, which sociologist Maria Augusta Neal has discussed at some length in her study: *A Socio-theology of Letting Go*, New York NY: Paulist Press, 1977. There, it was pointed out that, when the rich reinterpret aspects of the Christian vision to suit their own purposes, “the practice of Christianity loses its prophetic quality” (p. 2).

Gnuse reviews the prophetic sweep of the Israelite legal ethos, down through the nation’s evolving political and economic history, and traces the effects social change wrought upon the notion of biblical justice. An Assistant Professor in Old Testament Studies at Loyola University, New Orleans, it is in the areas of Israelite settlement, monarchy, and decline, that he offers his richest insights. This book, easily readable, with clear summaries at the end of each chapter, will provide Melanesian theologians with much food for thought.

Over and over again, the author points out that the aspect of the Israelite pastoral ethos, which made it so unique in the context of the urbane river civilisations of its ancient Near-Eastern world, was the idealism of the theologians, and their “courageous vision for society” (p. 36). Unequivocally, and often against mammoth odds, they strove to shape the goals of society, steer the nation in the direction of communal reform, and provide the prophets with a framework for their insistent and untiring statements of social critique.

Indeed, it was these same visionaries, and law makers, who provided Western civilisation, itself, with the humanitarian basis it

required for the development of its enduring ethical and legal guidelines.

Central to Gnuse's thesis, is his chapter on the Laws of Israel: Mandate for the Poor. Here is outlined the unique blend of theological idealism, humanitarianism, and economic pragmatism, which can still challenge theologians, as they struggle to formulate faith and justice directives for today.

Two examples used are the Gleaning Legislations (Deut 24:19-22; Lev 23:22), and the Jubilee Laws (Lev 25:1-10, 25-28).

In particular, the recurring Jubilee year, every 50 years, celebrated the people's right to reclaim property they had lost through any reason whatsoever. These solemn community occasions were to be prepared for by seventh-yearly Sabbath years, when everyone ceased normal activities, and remembered that all land and all possessions belonged to Yahweh, who had given them their liberation, their inheritance.

The vitality in these laws came from the religious vision of the theologians. Its focus was a liberated people's response, in love, to the great God Yahweh's act of deliverance on their behalf. With all people called to freedom, by Yahweh's action, everyone thereafter had the right to a respected status, in relation to the land, which was their inheritance. This idealism of Israelite religion was woven into the fabric of all laws, inspiring a deeply-humanitarian concern for economic, political, and social equality.

From this perspective, one can gain further insight into the broad biblical interpretation of the prohibition on stealing. It always made allowance for rights-of-access to property to satisfy basic needs, and ensured that no-one took away from a needy person things required for his livelihood.

Although, most certainly, these laws were often only an ideal, not put into practice, nevertheless, they offered constant inspiration for

attempts to maintain a type of society, based on justice and compassion for all – an inspiration, to which prophets repeatedly recalled the nation.

As the author points out, it is good to remember that these visionaries, these lawmakers, are our spiritual ancestors. They struggled to make sense of changing societies, conflicting value-systems, and movements of people out of a pastoral, into urban, living situations. The task that they undertook in their lifetime, can still inspire us in the tasks undertaken today. Despite their seeming failure, their message remains a constant challenge.

Robert Gnuse has done us a service by ridding an original clear biblical message of the subtly-accumulated misinterpretations of affluent nations.

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