

Books & the arts

Listen to those blue-collar blues

HOW OFTEN does CHRISTIANITY AND CRISIS review a book about white, Protestant blue-collar Americans? Not often. How often do C&C writers express dismay over Ronald Reagan's and the New Right's appeal to this same group? Very often. This combination of shock and inattention is not limited to C&C. It characterizes the liberal church more broadly; it tells us something about the biases of mainline Protestantism whose understanding of what is between 35 and 50 million Americans too often is limited to cultural stereotypes. Anyone looking for a way to move beyond this impasse will want to read Tex Sample's clear, elegantly written book.

Sample is a professor of church and society at St. Paul School of Theology in Kansas City, Missouri. He has served as a pastor, and he has directed the Social Relations Department of the Massachusetts Council of Churches. He has been active in community organizing efforts in Kansas City. Equally important, he grew up in a small town in rural Mississippi: He knows and cares deeply for the people he writes about.

Sample's approach to his subject is broad. *Blue Collar Ministry* begins with a statement of the mainstream culture's "religion of winning" and takes a good look at the reality of losing and what it does to the losers. Women, racial and ethnic minorities, the handicapped, and other groups can make sense of their "failure"; it is the result of discrimination against them. This helps them locate the source of their problems. But what about Anglo, blue-collar Protestant traditional women and men who have no such hook on which to hang their hats? They lack a cultural notion of peoplehood that might be a source of pride; they lack the political, economic, and moral concepts of citizenship, class, and equality that might provide them with a sense of outrage and

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Blue Collar Ministry

By TEX SAMPLE

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injustice about the status quo. The concept of class might help them understand their position, but that idea is not considered legitimate by mainstream America. America's TV talk shows feature no Julian Bonds or Gloria Steinems who can give visibility to this group of Americans. If we can appreciate this, we begin to appreciate the pain of this group. We begin to understand the arrogance of the "redneck" characterization. Self-blame is not only the phenomenon of highly marginal people. It is also the conclusion blue-collar Americans frequently draw when they wonder why success has passed them by.

Blue Collar Ministry moves from a broad view to an examination of four different blue-collar life-styles—"winners," "respectables," "survivors," and "hard-livers." Here is sociology at its best. Sample weaves pictures of life at the local level with broader understandings of contemporary American society. In the process he gives us a picture of "life on the block" and a context in which to understand it. His wonderful personal stories, interspersed with the theology and sociology in the book, let us in on the life of blue-collar, Protestant, Americans.

In "Blue Collar Respectables," Sample tells us about his own family:

In the sixth grade I came home from school with a "U" (for unsatisfactory) in deportment on my report card. My mother looked at it sternly and "cleared up" the issue with haste. "Look, boy. I don't care whether you're dumb or smart; I love you anyhow. But you don't have to be smart to be good! Now, the next time you come home

with a report card showing you flunked conduct, I'm going to tear up your ("existential ground of being" expressed in primitive Anglo-Saxon language)!"

Then she added, "This is a respectable family. We work hard for it, and we damned well expect to keep it that way." It took me 20 years to understand how important my mother's comment was.

And in "Blue Collar Hard Living," Sample introduces us to a classmate named Jack who couldn't recite a poem for his eighth-grade teacher. She asks why he didn't learn and thought he couldn't learn a poem. Jack says: "I'll tell you what, Miss Lovett. I'll learn that po'm if you'll answer 'yes' to one question. Miss Lovett, when I quituate from school and go out there in the oil field to get me a job, is that tool pusher who runs the rig going to say to me, 'Recite me a po'm?'"

But Sample's intention is not just to emphathize or to understand—though he is excellent at both. His primary purpose in writing *Blue Collar Ministry* is to argue that churches involved in efforts to bring about a more just society must include his people in their thinking and strategy. Their powerlessness and alienation are as important as anyone's.

Much of mainline sociology assumes that what is is what is meant to be, or that what is is extraordinarily difficult to change and efforts to bring about change run the risk of making things even worse. Thus a certain metaphysical pathos runs through many of the efforts to describe America today. Not so with Sample; he is a critic. As sociologist, he aims at telling us the way the world is so that we might change it, make it more like the world it ought to be. As theologian, he calls for a "theology of grace...that proclaims that all people are subjects of God's love and, therefore, of infinite worth." This theology "challenges distributions of power (and wealth) in which the few control the many...." Sample tells us: "The aim of

life is no longer for each person to be number one, but for each person to contribute to the completion of self, community and creation."

In search of a model

It is on the question of political strategy that I think the book is weakest. Sample would have the pastor look to the "ward heelers," key figures in the building of such urban political machines as that of Chicago's late Richard Daley. Ward heelers worked at the local level, providing services to people and mobilizing votes for the machine's candidates. Sample uses their example to urge pastors "to cast off middle-class imperialism in order to break down and cross dividing walls of hostility. Where he or she is effective, perhaps the ward healer can become a ward healer as well." I doubt it.

Even at their best, the ward heelers were dispensers of services and sometimes advocates for their people. Their business was not to hold accountable, let alone to transform, the dominant institutions of the city or U.S. society. Read, for example, interviews with leaders of the old Daley Machine. They really cared for their people. They served them. That the system of which they were part created many of the problems in the first place wasn't very important to them.

In pointing to the ward healer, Sample hopes that we will focus on caring for people in the neighborhood. He would have done better, however, to point to the Catholic ethnic parish of the 1920s and 1930s or to militant union locals of the great organizing period of the CIO. These were both caring communities and institutions involved in efforts to change the system so that it was more responsive to people's needs.

In concluding his book, Sample identifies broadly based community organizing as an important vehicle for the realization of his vision. He overestimates what community organizations have accomplished to date, and he makes debatable assertions about so-called models of community organizing. But he is on solid ground in identifying organizing as the basis for overcoming "the hidden injuries of class, the subjective feelings of alienation, loss of dignity, and sense of failure" of this politically volatile and important group of people. (Sample's book is a good com-

panion piece, and in some ways a balance to, Greg Pierce's generally excellent Activism That Makes Sense, a book that elaborates on the process of building church-based community organizations.)

The Reagan/Republican strategy has been to assume the alienation and relatively low participation of lower-income and minority voters and to build instead an electoral coalition consisting of the middle class, upper-income voters, and the majority of the white working class. This strategy has been successful.

One reason for this success has been the economy and the failure of the Democrats to do much about it when they were in the White House. They also failed to have very believable economic programs when they were out of office.

A second reason lies in the response of most white working-class Americans to the phenomenon of the shrinking economic pie. They blame the new persons at the table who want a piece of that pie (minorities and women) for their predicament. It follows that they resent them.

INTELLECTUALS AND RELIGION



Recently The New York Times Magazine carried an article on the "return to religion" among intellectuals. From Harvard to Berkeley, among both professors and students, and amid inquisitive people generally, there is an undeniable renewal of interest in the questions traditional religion raises and seeks to answer. This interest is largely a result of the failures of secular substitutes for religion (such as rationalism, narcissism, technological utopianism, aestheticism, and extremist political ideologies) to give abidingly satisfying answers to the truly significant puzzles in life: goodness, suffering, love, death, and the meaning of it all.

By no means, however, does this religious reawakening entail falling into the suffocating arms of a Rev. Moon or a Jerry Falwell, or embracing the ersatz gods of dog-eat-dog individualism, consumerism, or America First, which we see celebrated all around us these days. Nor does the religious renaissance imply a retreat from working for peace and justice. Rather, there is an awareness that, in the words of Jean Bethke Elshtain, religious commitment "can help further social reform," and that religion can supply the ethical bedrock upon which to make political commitments which are far more solid than those based on passing ideologies and enthusiasms. Nor does the new openness to religion signify a hostility to science, but rather an appreciation of the limits of science and the dangers

of pseudo-scientific messianisms.

The New York Times Magazine article discussed the NEW OXFORD REVIEW as part of this "return to religion," and rightly so. We at the NEW OXFORD REVIEW are spearheading today's intellectual fascination with what Daniel Bell terms "the sacred." We are particularly interested in exploring religious commitments which result in progressive social consequences, as exemplified by such giants as Dorothy Day, Bishop Tutu, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Lech Walesa, Martin Luther King Jr., Cesar Chavez, and Archbishop Romero. And we probe the literary riches offered by such greats as Ignazio Silone, Graham Greene, Thomas Merton, W.H. Auden, Flannery O'Connor, and Walker Percy.

An ecumenical and literary monthly edited by lay Catholics, we've been characterized by the University of Chicago's Martin E. Marty as "lively" and by Newsweek as "thoughtful and often cheeky." And there's no denying the Library Journal's verdict that we will "doubtless command increasing attention."

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Such has not always been the case, however. Examples of unity across racial and other lines in times of economic distress are to be found in our nation's history.

A third reason for the success of the Reagan strategy is to be found in the arrogance toward blue-collar whites frequently found in liberal and radical intellectual and political circles and in some of the leadership of minority communities and of the women's movement.

When will we learn that education-against-racism or against-sexism programs simply don't work in the way they were formulated in the 1960s and 1970s? A better approach may be found in organizing which recognizes and celebrates the cultural and social uniqueness of different groups while seeking areas of common interest and values, and work in common, broadly based organizations. An old United Mine Workers' Union acquaintance, for example, once told me:

The way I dealt with racism among Southern white mine workers was real simple, Mike. I'd take one of them by the arm and point to a black worker. "Who's he work for?" I'd ask. "Peabody," he'd answer. "Who do you work for?" I'd ask. "Peabody," he'd reply. "You think about it for a while and then let's talk some more." That's how I'd conclude that conversation. Worked real well. When these black and white workers started getting together, meeting each other's families, figuring out what they wanted from the boss, they'd start learning what equality was all about. And they'd develop mutual respect for each other.

The point is that education needs a context in which to take place. Jesse Jackson learned that lesson when he campaigned in steel mill towns. Jackson's clarity on plant shutdown issues got him a majority primary vote in a number of white working-class precincts. And it was interesting that in Appalachian mining communities the real choice for many voters in 1968 was between Robert Kennedy and George Wallace, both of whom demonstrated an understanding of the poor whites of the region.

Sample patiently teaches his readers this lesson. While he deals in much more than political terms, the political lesson is important—particularly as we will now see more Americans homeless, more of

then economically strapped, more of them looking for answers than at any time since the 1930s. Reagan and the New Religious Right start with apparent respect for blue-collar whites. They begin with them the way they are. Then they offer them images of power (American strength against Godless Communism in, for example, Grenada) and convenient scapegoats: minorities, women, do-gooders, the welfare state.

The rest of us, Sample tells us, need to reexamine our stereotypes of this group.

Their discontents have been distorted, to be sure. But they are real, and they are legitimate. And the people who have them, Sample reminds us, are every bit as much God's children as the poorest of the poor, the blackest of the black, the people of Soweto and the peasants of Latin America. Until liberal and radical middle-class people rid themselves of their stereotypes, they will be unwilling and unable to relate to this critical constituency.

Many, many people in the churches ought to read this book. □

The moral citizen: a primer

DAVID KUEBRICH

Saying Yes and Saying No

On Rendering to God and Caesar

By ROBERT McAFEE BROWN

Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986

143 pp., \$7.95

WHOW DOES IT BECOME a man to behave toward this American government today? I answer that he cannot without disgrace be associated with it." Henry David Thoreau's provocative statement was, of course, located in a particular historical moment: Slavery was legalized and the United States was waging an expansionist war with Mexico. But Thoreau's question must still be grappled with because with the emergence of modern democracy, the status of members of a nation changed from obedient subjects to responsible citizens. They not only gained the right to help shape government policy but also acquired moral responsibility for how their government behaved. Thoreau's essay, originally more aptly entitled "Resistance to Civil Government," probed the new problem of how a citizen could be moral—live in grace—in a republic with gravely immoral policies. Thoreau's question, however, transcends his historical moment not simply because it addresses a problem inherent in democracy but also because so much of U.S. history has been characterized by policies that continue the practices of domination and exploitation against which he protested.

It is appropriate to introduce Robert McAfee Brown's book with Thoreau's question not because Brown shares Thoreau's penchant for the shocking statement—he does not—but because Thoreau's question succinctly indicates Brown's central concern: How can a citizen love justice and yet support current U.S. economic and military policies? Thoreau posed three possible responses: to give unquestioning support for unjust laws, to support them while working for reform, or to break them at once. Thoreau, of course, argued for the last alternative. Brown's answer is not as blunt as Thoreau's, nor is he as given to ringing moral pronouncements. Yet if his voice is more measured, the moral demands his steady vision and cogent arguments make upon the reader are discomfiting indeed.

Brown's basic premise is that to say yes to Jesus Christ one must say no to a growing number of U.S. policies. In the early chapters he quickly delineates the theological foundation for this position—a position treated at greater length in earlier works—by arguing in the manner of the Latin American liberation theologians that the God of the Bible is preeminently a God of justice and liberation. Accordingly, U.S. policies that put profits or national security before human claims for the necessary means to life and freedom are, in fact, forms of idolatry.

Saying Yes and Saying No is fruitfully read as continuing the argument of Brown's *Theology in a New Key*. In the earlier work—after exploring some of the

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