

6-1-2009

# Book Review: Etty Hillesum and the Flow of Presence: A Voegelinian Analysis, by Meins G.S. Coetsier

Francis T. Hannafey S.J.  
*Fairfield University*, fhannafey@fairfield.edu

## Peer Reviewed

---

### Repository Citation

Hannafey, Francis T. S.J., "Book Review: Etty Hillesum and the Flow of Presence: A Voegelinian Analysis, by Meins G.S. Coetsier" (2009). *Religious Studies Faculty Publications*. Paper 15.  
<http://digitalcommons.fairfield.edu/religiousstudies-facultypubs/15>

### Published Citation

Hannafey, Francis T. "Etty Hillesum and the Flow of Presence: A Voegelinian Analysis, by Meins G.S. Coetsier." *Theological Studies* 70.2 (2009): 512-513.

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Religious Studies Department at DigitalCommons@Fairfield. It has been accepted for inclusion in Religious Studies Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Fairfield. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@fairfield.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@fairfield.edu).

overdependence on the Hebrew Scriptures. H. does not review the Gospels at all and the Pauline epistles are dealt with in ten short pages.

In chapter 4, H. places his conception of economic justice in dialogue with both secular and theological notions of justice. Here he attempts too much, presenting and critiquing conceptions of justice from the Utilitarians, Rawls, Nozick, Catholic social teaching, Reinhold Niebuhr, and liberation theology. These presentations/critiques are exceptionally brief, (Nozick: 5 pages, Niebuhr: 6, liberation theology: 4, etc.), and H. at times misrepresents what these theories actually maintain. For example, he argues that Catholic social teaching “has not grappled adequately with the seriousness of sin” (141) yet never mentions *Gaudium et spes*’s treatment of the human person or John Paul II’s discussion of the “structures of sin” from *Sollicitudo rei socialis* (1987).

H. then demonstrates how his biblically-based conception of economic justice is relevant for contemporary economic life. His articulation of commutative justice is noteworthy, but his treatment of distributive justice remains vague and unconvincing. He concludes by engaging the U.S. bishops’ pastoral Economic Justice for All (1986) on the inadequacy of human rights as the foundation for economic justice, as well as the tension between public and private responsibility for economic life. Here again H. raises some excellent themes, but his overall treatment is too brief and not helpful beyond the barest of introductions.

JOZEF D. ZALOT  
College of Mount St. Joseph, Cincinnati

SOCIAL SELVES AND POLITICAL REFORM: FIVE VISIONS IN CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIAN ETHICS. By C. Melissa Snarr. New York: T. & T. Clark, 2007. Pp. xxvi + 134. \$125.

Snarr argues that Christian ethics calls for political engagement, but she also claims that the exact nature of the engagement is influenced by how one understands the “social self.” She then examines the moral anthropologies

of five Protestant Christian ethicists, demonstrating varying conceptions of the social self. Each conception, in turn, justifies the legitimacy of differing methods of political participation, as well as differing goals for and efforts at political reform. In individual chapters she places Walter Rauschenbusch, Reinhold Niebuhr, Stanley Hauerwas, Beverly Harrison, and Emilie Townes each within his/her social context, explains how they developed their particular understanding of the social self, and demonstrates how these understandings entail practical political engagement. Her final chapter summarizes the main contributions of the previous chapters and correlates these contributions into six “Core Convictions of the Social Self.”

The book’s overall value lies with its depictions of how the authors develop their respective understandings of the social self; thus the book is most relevant to those working in moral anthropology. Still, while these presentations are informative, they also are too brief, too similar, and thus too repetitive. Focusing on fewer authors would have helped, as would the inclusion of a contrasting Catholic author—say, John Courtney Murray. S. also spends as much time discussing the limitations of each author’s vision of the social self (and thus their contribution to active political engagement) as she does discussing the strengths, without drawing the limitations to helpful conclusions.

JOZEF D. ZALOT  
College of Mount St. Joseph, Cincinnati

ETTY HILLESUM AND THE FLOW OF PRESENCE: A VOEGELINIAN ANALYSIS. By Meins G. S. Coetsier. Eric Voegelin Institute Series in Political Philosophy: Studies in Religion and Politics. Columbia: University of Missouri, 2008. Pp. xiv + 228. \$37.50.

Coetsier carefully studies the diaries and letters of Etty Hillesum, devoting special effort to a linguistic analysis of central Hillesum language symbols. Drawing extensively on the philosophy of Eric Voegelin—and particularly on his concept of “the flow of presence” (100) in the response of the human soul

to the divine, C. seeks to better understand the "relationship between the life of Etty Hillesum and her writings" (193), proposing that Hillesum had an experience "that broke with the ordinary diary" (197, i.e., that pushed her beyond an ordinary form of diary writing), revealing a "symbolic form of transcendent address" (198). C. suggests that this interpretive insight can help us more fully understand Hillesum's encounter with the "transcendent Other" (197), an encounter that eventually emerged at the center of her extraordinary life, suffering, and relationships.

C. actually offers carefully detailed analysis of both Hillesum and Voegelin. Hillesum's writings and central Voegelinian ideas enter into creative dialogue, resulting in richer understandings of each. In places, however, the book progresses slowly, due mostly to its technical analysis and extensive quotations of Hillesum and Voegelin. This density may challenge some readers. Others might question the use of a comprehensive philosophical framework to examine diaries and letters that often break beyond linguistic analysis, at least in their spiritual and mystical dimensions.

These questions aside, C.'s analysis is original, carefully researched, and highly creative. His study of the original Dutch texts is a particularly valuable contribution, placing the volume among the best English, book-length studies of Hillesum. In the end, C.'s appeal to Voegelin's theory of "the flow of presence" succeeds in presenting more fully the depth and power of Hillesum's astounding prayer-filled experience during a period of horrendous violence, evil, and suffering—a time, but also an experience, that must never be forgotten.

FRANCIS T. HANNAFEY, S.J.  
Fairfield University, Conn.

**HOLY ANGER: JACOB, JOB, JESUS.** By Lytta Basset. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2007. Pp. 295. \$28.

Appealing to the biblical stories of Cain, Jacob, Job, and Jesus, Basset argues that anger is a gift that invites us into the deepest engagement with self and other. Drawing on exegetical, theological, philo-

sophical, and psychoanalytic disciplines, she defends anger against censure and silence, arguing instead that anger plays key roles in discovering one's own identity (especially uncovering those convictions one simply cannot relinquish without ceasing to be oneself), differentiating oneself from others, and simultaneously pulling one's true self into relationship with others, particularly with the Other. Above all, anger can provoke a confrontation with God who is perfectly capable of absorbing all of our anger without retaliation or withdrawal. Through different paths, Jacob and Job eventually respond positively to anger's divine invitation; Cain, by contrast, gives in to an unholy rage that eliminates the other rather than confront the Other.

B. draws on an astonishing breadth of resources, engaging Hebrew and Greek word studies, Jewish and Christian biblical commentators (both ancient and modern), classic psychoanalysis, and dialogue partners running from René Girard and Paul Ricoeur to Elie Wiesel and Albert Camus. While the work is often insightful, the intertwining of these resources sometimes leaves the book stylistically muddled. More importantly, B.'s argument for anger is one-sided. For example, the NT receives far less attention than the Hebrew Bible, and when looking at Jesus, B. focuses far more on Jesus' words about bringing division than on his reconciling work or teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. Likewise, B. does not acknowledge that anger is not always a gift. Anger can be malformed, directed at the wrong person, with the wrong intensity, for the wrong reason. It is unlikely that such anger should always be expressed or is always an invitation to identity and relationship.

JOSEPH H. KOTVA JR.  
Associated Mennonite Biblical  
Seminary, Elkhart, Ind.

**POPE PAUL VI.: CHRISTIAN VALUES AND VIRTUES.** Edited and introduced by Karl A. Schulz. New York: Crossroad, 2007. Pp. 221. \$19.95.

Schulz has edited a special type of book in spiritual theology that will appeal greatly to some. In eleven chapters,