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# American Catholics Through the Twentieth-Century: Spirituality, Lay Experience, and Public Life

Elizabeth A. Dreyer

Fairfield University, [edreyer@fairfield.edu](mailto:edreyer@fairfield.edu)

## Peer Reviewed

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*Friendship and Ways to Truth.* By David B. Burrell, C.S.C. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000. ix + 125 pages. \$15.00 (paper \$8.00).

Great thinkers do not always make great friends. When James Joyce and Marcel Proust met for their first and only time, both quietly agreed that truffles were tasty and called it a day. A thinker like David Burrell does much to restore faith in intellectual and spiritual friendships and the demands such friendships place on us. For Burrell, the quest for truth requires us to be concerned with intersubjectivity. Since knowing the truth entails a deepening of subjectivity, friendships among those who seek the truth are to be treasured.

Burrell makes his point in five short chapters that are indebted to thinkers like Aristotle and Lonergan, Kierkegaard and Aquinas for their ideas but to Montaigne for their style and personal quality. Starting with the death of a soul-friend, Burrell goes on to talk about intellectual friendships (e.g., his friendship with Diogenes Allen) and friendships that reach beyond cultural and religious boundaries (his friendships with Muslims). One memorable chapter brings al-Ghazali together with Thomas Aquinas for a conversation on the possibility of friendship with God. Another chapter deals with friendships with atheists and Burrell's desire to clarify the Christian notion of God so that these friends understand better what they are rejecting. Throughout these far-ranging reflections, *Leitmotiven* announce themselves continually. Truth as a form of intersubjectivity is held up as an alternative to both modernist objectivity (as seen in the Kantian and neo-Thomist quest for certainty) and post-modernist relativism. The intersubjectivity of truth requires a hermeneutics of tradition and a rejection of foundationalism. Friendship, therefore, has a privileged role in the quest for truth. Not surprisingly, Aristotle is given some lovely arias to sing. Indebted as Burrell is to Aristotle, the emphasis on the similarity and equality of friends in the Nicomachian Ethics is inadequate to Burrell's befriending of the religious other (Muslims) and the transcendent other (God).

Essays of this depth do not come from the pen of someone newly acquainted with the intellectual and spiritual demands of friendship. They are the mature work of one who is practiced in this difficult art. More than simply agreeing with his conclusions, Burrell wants to offer his friendship to the reader. Offers as good as this are not to be found in every book.

*Loyola Marymount University*

JAMES FREDERICKS

*American Catholics through the Twentieth Century: Spirituality, Lay Experience, and Public Life.* By Clair Wolfteich. New York: Crossroad, 2001. xi + 203 pages. \$24.95 (paper).

Wolfteich is Assistant Professor of Practical Theology and Spiritual Formation at Boston University School of Theology. This volume documents causes of, and suggests solutions for, what the author sees as pervasive fragmentation and confusion about the meaning of lay spirituality, and the role of the laity in church and world in the twentieth century. She traces the tensions and complexities of private and public understandings of lay spirituality, in-

cluding a struggle over what it means to live in the Spirit and to be church in an ever-changing American culture.

Wolfeich begins by describing the new sense of mission and agency visible in lay movements of the '30s, '40s and '50s—Young Christian Workers, the Grail, the Christian Family Movement, for example. While Vatican II offered a theological rationale for the work of the laity in the world, John F. Kennedy, in response to fears about the role his Catholicism might play in American politics, articulated a model that separated faith from public service. Others who addressed issues of religion and secularization in different ways are treated—John Courtney Murray, Harvey Cox, Thomas Merton, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, César Chavez and Daniel Callahan.

By the end of the '60s, we witness a move inward and a craving for immediate religious experience on the one hand, and a surge of activist piety on the other. The Catholic Church's stand on birth control pushed to the fore questions about Catholicism's relationship to the wider society, about marriage as a spiritual path, and family experience as a theological resource. Tensions between public and private continued into the '80s and '90s. A spirituality that inserted itself into all aspects of daily life (lay experience seen as a source of revelation; the bishops' pastoral letters; a universal, common priesthood) competed with cues that they were to be kept separate (disputes between bishops/Vatican and politicians about the role of faith in the public arena—Cuomo, Ferraro, Drinan; moves to keep ministerial and common priesthood separate).

In a final chapter, Wolfeich extracts from her brief historical, sociological narrative three theological issues: 1) models of spirituality (contemplative aspects should not be automatically privileged over active ones; particular types of lay vocation are identified—politician, prophet, invisible leaven, dialoguer and domestic church); 2) models of church (understanding church as pilgrim People of God or Mystical Body of Christ best inspire lay vocation); 3) spiritual practices (undertaking discernment processes that link faith and practical reason; using an observe-judge-act model for making faith-informed decisions; and practicing *lectio divina*).

In 170 pages, one can but limn select highlights of an entire century of lay Catholic life. Wolfeich's reliance on newspapers and journals such as *Commonweal* gives her text an existential quality but it does not take account of the scores of volumes on all aspects of lay spirituality written in the last forty years. While a great deal still needs to be done, I would suggest that the lay spiritual quest is much further along than this volume suggests. Because of its length and readability, this book is recommended for introductory undergraduate courses on contemporary Catholicism or Christian vocation.

Fairfield University

ELIZABETH A. DREYER

*Spiritual Questions for the Twenty-First Century: Essays in Honor of Joan D. Chittister*. Edited by Mary Hembrow Snyder. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2001. 192 pages. \$18.00 (paper).

Each of the twenty-five contributors to *Spiritual Questions for the Twenty-First Century* was asked to respond to the question "What do you think is the