

Review

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COUTURE, PAMELA D. *Blessed Are the Poor? Women's Poverty, Family Policy, and Practical Theology*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1991. 219 pp.

With keen insight into human experience and broad cultural movements, Pamela D. Couture sheds fresh light on the problem of women's poverties in all its social and theological complexity. As an exercise in practical theology that grew out of work in this new field at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago and out of Couture's own encounters as a single mother, *Blessed Are the Poor?* demonstrates the value of a "thick description" of the situation of female-headed households, read in light of theologians who, despite their patriarchal presumptions, would look askance at current policies that leave so many single mothers and their children destitute. In pursuit of a more adequate tapestry on which to hang public policies, Couture painstakingly traces the threads of a theological criterion of care of the vulnerable in Luther, Wesley, medieval practices, and the American women's tradition. Readers will welcome the results.

Those in theology and the social sciences will find in the opening methodological chapter and in chapters on Luther's theology of sexuality, domesticity, and family and on Wesley's ethic of economic interdependence a helpful formal model of practical theological reflection. Those in women's studies will benefit from the analysis of gender, employment, and mothering in chapters on the "rhetoric of equality" and on the many images of motherhood (politicized, conflicted, idealized, professionalized, persevering, protected). Those interested in public policy and those in the church alike will gravitate toward the final chapter, where the retrieval of theological traditions and analysis of the social situation come together in a development of David Ellwood's concept of "reasonable responsibility" as one viable response to the poverty of mothers and children.

Regardless of the vantage point from which one reads, one cannot help but be persuaded by two grounding convictions. Couture urges us to rethink critically American myths of self-sufficiency. The long-standing Western rhetoric of equality and freedom, built on either a Platonic rejection of domestic tasks and eradication of family life or an Aristotelian economic hierarchy based on female subordination, has moved U.S. policy to the brink of disaster. Welfare and divorce laws deny the "reality of the fundamental supports of most 'self-supporting' people" (p. 165) and punish a generation of children and parents for their "dependency" on society and family. Instead, we ought to relocate the psychological benefits of self-sufficiency within the larger context of fundamental interpersonal relationships and socioeconomic networks that cannot be secured through individual effort alone. A second, related conviction suggests an alternative to Plato and Aristotle: "shared responsibility" or policies grounded in Christian claims for the worth of individuals, the equal value of domestic and public work, the importance of economic and relational reciprocity in families and society, and the imperative to care for the vulnerable. This ethic of care means testing any macroeconomic policy by its impact on the poorest among us, recognizing the merit of domestic work, helping families sustain themselves, ensuring minimum economic support for our children, challenging the profit orientation of legal and medical professions, and so forth.

To cover this kind of ground in a book for the educated public means that Couture has had to translate theoretical language and reduce detailed research to "snapshots." This "collage" of major figures and movements tends to test the reader's tenacity. Because her critique of the destructive implications of capitalism and patriarchy is sometimes muted, this book might be read alongside books

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like Hilda Scott's *Working Your Way to the Bottom* (London: Pandora, 1984), which expand some of Couture's compressed theses. For, in order to imagine the actual contours of shared responsibility, as Scott suggests, Americans must challenge the dichotomy between "productive" and "nonproductive" work in male and market definitions of labor. Policies must establish unpaid work, which rests primarily on the shoulders of women worldwide, as a legitimate economic category with its own criteria of value for both women and men. *Blessed Are the Poor?* reaps the benefits of placing this kind of policy deliberation within the context of solid practical theological reflection.

BONNIE J. MILLER-MCLEMORE, *Chicago Theological Seminary*.

POLING, JAMES NEWTON. *The Abuse of Power: A Theological Problem*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991. 224 pp. \$15.95 (paper).

James Newton Poling has written a powerful book that aims to educate and motivate readers to work toward the transformation of self and society so that abuse can be prevented and healing promoted. The abuse he is addressing is sexual abuse. Because incest, rape, and molestation are primarily acts of violence, the victims of such crimes are the victims of the abuse of power. This abuse of power is a theological problem because of the way the Christian tradition has defined the nature of power and its legitimate use. In our Western, patriarchal society, unjust power relationships between men and women have been endorsed by the institutional church and by the image of God, Jesus, and the atonement proclaimed in the Christian tradition. This book explores the complicity of the church and theology in sexual abuse and advocates a model of an inclusive, just church and an image of a relational, ambiguous God that together enhance life and restrain evil.

Poling's book is a book of practical theology. He reflects on the relation between God and humanity on the basis of experience and addresses issues of ministry. In his analysis he draws heavily on process theology, especially Bernard Loomer, psychoanalytic theory, and feminist and African-American sociology and theology. He listens to the narratives of both victims and perpetrators. We meet "Karen," a survivor of sexual abuse who tells her own story. Her understated description of abuse eloquently documents its horror while it testifies to her courage and resilient hope as she seeks healing. Because Poling could not obtain a first-person account by a perpetrator, he composed a portrait based on his many years of experience counseling molesters. He unflinchingly describes the crimes as well as the interior rage and pain of the molester. A third story that occasionally gets told is Poling's own, and it is crucial in order to authenticate his analysis. He confesses that as a white, well-educated, heterosexual male he is limited—he has blind spots, he has aided perpetrators in the past by remaining silent, and that through counseling molesters he has had to face his own repressed violence and ineptness in nurturing healthy relationships. The Schreber case, a classic in the discipline of psychology, is the final example by which he demonstrates the value of his analytical constructs to identify correctly the dynamics of abuse, the path of healing, and the locus of the theological problem.

The theological problem is acute, he argues, because sexual violence is not an aberration but an expression of cultural norms and values. North American society, by prizing the privacy of the family, by devaluing women and children,