

[MJTM 15 (2013–2014)]

#### BOOK REVIEW

Gregory Baum. *Truth and Relevance: Catholic Theology in French Quebec since the Quiet Revolution*. Montreal, London: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2014. 256 pp. Pbk. ISBN 0773543260.

*Truth and Relevance* is a work of reflection from an experienced educator and participant in the Roman Catholic Church in Quebec; and as such it offers an articulate engagement with Quebec's social-political-theological past, elucidating the ecclesial changes (e.g., the radical decline of Catholic influence in society) and determining factors behind them. Gregory Baum moved from St. Michael's College in the University of Toronto after teaching theology and religious studies for twenty-six years to the faculty of religious studies at McGill University. While noting the often overlooked significance and academic culture of French-speaking Canada, Baum provides a window into the rich, complex, and fascinating history of the Church in Quebec. Programmatically, Baum traces the developments of the Catholic Church in Quebec from the height of its cultural influence to its relegation to the sidelines, demonstrating how the two major contributing factors were the "Quiet Revolution" and Vatican II.

Baum begins by demonstrating how unique the Catholic Church in Quebec was in the first half of the twentieth century, noting that the situation had no parallels in the rest of Canada or European nations. What is now run by governmental programming for the public (e.g., health services, education) belonged wholly to the functions of the Catholic Church in society; and this was not the involvement of a happy coincidence in a proper secular society but the accepted structure of society itself (namely church-dependent). While the history of secularization includes many influences, an early and monumental change was the up-

rising of the “Quiet Revolution,” which among many things saw the governmental takeover of public services, sequestering the church from society and, consequently, largely removing it from peoples’ consciousness. Baum argues that “revolution” is a fitting phrase (even for a relatively peaceable “revolution”) given the ecclesial setting; Protestant societies experience secularization in a progressive fashion while Catholic ones experience types of revolutions because there is a single overarching authority and Church to which reactionaries can direct themselves.

The experience of Quebec through this time was reflected in the discussions and solutions of Vatican II. Theologians in Quebec followed the advice of Vatican II, paying close attention to the cultural, political, and economic challenges of society. Looking upon theology as a living and transformative endeavor, they looked again at Scripture as the “soul” of theology. They evaluated societal structures as never before, offering their own challenges to oppressive features within that society. As a contextual enterprise, theologians wanted to proclaim the universal truths of the gospel in a form that was relevant and compelling for the present.

The theological shifts (within Quebec and beyond) were many and various in nature. Baum cites Karl Rahner as a crucial Catholic thinker who related fundamental theology (or apologetics) to cultural evaluation (and who brought immanence into conversation with transcendence with his Trinitarian rule—the economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity). Baum discusses the turn toward panentheism by a great many thinkers, but nowhere else more importantly than in the work of Fernand Dumont. Moreover, Catholicism saw the radical challenge of feminist theologians who, by protesting the patriarchal tendencies in Christian tradition, brought forth genuine theological reforms at the core of theology itself (e.g., the doctrine of God and personal names).

For all that this book has to contribute, there are a few points of criticism worth mentioning. In Baum’s theological narration of Quebec’s changes and developments, he describes “panentheism” as being a determinative conceptual supposition both as response and initiation to the developments under consideration.

Discussing the “contemporary turn to panentheism,” Baum gives four characteristics of this theological formula: first, it generates an open attitude to other religions and traditions assuring that God is at work redemptively in them in a “hidden” way; second, “traditional theism” posited God as a ruler over the universe who allowed—though he did not create—evil; third, God is more than a transcendent “Thou” as the truly immanent one, bringing new meaning to contemplation of the transpersonal names of God; fourth and finally, in light of feminist critique, panentheism sees God as a gracious presence among human “becoming” (in non-patriarchal terms; 41–42).

However, Baum’s conceptual application of “panenthiesm” suffers from logical imprecision and an apparent unfamiliarity with the nuances of Christian theological insight. The formula looms large throughout the work as a crucial alternative for Quebec’s theologians and a conviction that Baum “fully shares,” scattering affirmative comments and gestures through the book. He continues to articulate this notion as a needed and fruitful challenge to “classic theism,” perpetuating sentiment for the novel to provide a harmonious and liberating account for contemporary Christians; however, it never becomes clear how panentheism proper deconstructs a classic view while sustaining its own position. Baum gives the overarching interpretation of panentheism “as a theology of redemption” (52), which overthrows the “ruling” God of classic theism. But we would be remiss to think classic theism is somehow inherently opposed to a robust theology of redemption. Moreover, the place of the transcendent within a (panentheistic) immanentism “summons forth a new form of prayer, the contemplation of union with God, inherited from the mystical tradition” (51). Again, Baum continues to abrasively push towards a “new” form of theology only to disregard the continuity and proper place of emphases like contemplative prayer within the larger Christian tradition on the whole. He attributes panentheism to thinkers like Moltmann, who does use the term, but then relates it equally to Paul Tillich and the phenomenological tradition of Christian thinkers (his discussion of the “Transcendent” becoming an idol is undeniably cognizant of Jean-Luc Marion).

In addition, there are two brief points regarding the readability of the work itself. The history Baum attempts to cover is a dense and complex story to tell, which makes any attempt to bring coherence to it a challenging task; Baum does this very well. However, the chapters themselves are not structured chronologically but topically, which on occasion makes it difficult to mentally locate oneself within the overarching story. Moreover, the vast collection of theologians (with their respective influences and interactions) makes it difficult to articulate “Catholic Theology in French Quebec,” and the attempt to cover this many thinkers forces Baum to move from one theologian to another in rapid succession—making it something of a challenge to ingest all that there is to take in (see especially chapter 5: “Jesus Greater than the Church”).

That being said, the study is excellent for a number of reasons. What cannot be overlooked is how Baum’s own involvement in the history that he describes comes forth in compelling and relevant ways throughout (Baum presenting and participating at important conferences and councils). His involvement is made ever more lucid by his having come from (English-speaking) Ontario, being able to reflect and offer insights to outsiders, which makes the content all the more receivable.

In addition, the balance between history, cultural evaluation, political assessment, and theological engagement portrays the historical narrative with the complexities that are proper to it and without which it would not feel like a complete story. Baum conveys the material with an invested interest, namely the interest of seeing the church learn and enact its rightful place: neither forcing oppressive hierarchical structures nor abandoning society to its own demise. Therefore, this work is a rich piece of theological and historical investigation that will serve a wide audience.

The book has excellent readability, introducing thinkers and concepts with ample sensitivity to unexposed readers and using limited technical terminology. Given the nature of the work, it can be successfully used for its insight regarding the Catholic Church in the twentieth century (of course pertaining especially to the Catholic Church in Quebec), the process of secularization in Quebec, and the theological influences of the twentieth centu-

ry generally (with a specific focus upon their manifestation in Quebec). The book's appeal is broad while its focus is specific. It is highly recommended for anyone interested in comprehending something of the nuances of this important story.

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