BOOK REVIEWS


The late David Duke’s biography of Harry F. Ward rescues from obscurity the life of a significant ethicist of the first half of the 20th century. Duke makes abundant and excellent use of both archival and published sources in this study. He charts the life of Ward from his youth in a British Methodist home and his immigration to the United States in the 1890s, to his radicalization as a young Methodist minister in Chicago’s working class neighborhoods. As a Social Gospeler, Ward helped found the Methodist Federation for Social Service and composed Methodism’s Social Creed, later adopted by the Federal Council of Churches. He was also one of the founders and president of the board of the American Civil Liberties Union. Ward ultimately became a professor of ethics at Union Theological Seminary in New York City. Duke documents the social movements and the philosophies which helped to form Ward’s outlook on life.

The real focus of the book revolves around two issues. Duke wants the reader to understand Ward’s concept of a socially just society. For Ward this included the idea of democratic economics, a concept never sharply defined. This idea was a driving force in Ward’s intellectual life and was also a passion for Duke. In fact, it is so much a passion that it is difficult at times to determine where Duke’s summary of Ward’s thought ends and Duke’s own commentary and point of view begins. Readers need to beware that the text is not above “evangelizing” on Ward’s behalf. At times this is confusing if not disturbing. Perhaps if the author had lived long enough, one last edit would have remedied this problem.

Duke is also at pains to explain why Ward became marginalized toward the end of his life. Unlike Ward’s economics and general social stances, which Duke appears to applaud, Duke takes pains to point out what he considers a major moral failure of Ward — his very uncritical support of the Soviet Union. This in the face of the evidence for Stalin’s purges, the gulags, and the deal with the Nazis. It was this attitude, especially at the end of his life in the 1950s and 1960s, that damaged Ward’s reputation according to Duke.

These two themes dominate the book. There are other themes which could have been amplified as well. While there is some information about
Ward’s and Reinhold Niebuhr’s tense relationship and opposing views of church and society, more could have been discussed. More could have been included about his relationship as president of the board of the ACLU. But perhaps the mark of a good work is that it leaves the reader wanting more and that it has opened up new questions. For those interested in the Progressive Era, the Social Gospel, or specific aspects of American society and politics in the first half of the 20th century this will be a useful addition to the bookshelf.

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A. Raymond George (1912-1998) was a British Methodist minister, theologian, liturgical scholar, Christian educator, ecumenical champion, spiritual guide. His role in 20th–century Methodist worship development, in Britain and internationally, was immense. He extensively influenced world Methodism’s ecumenical stance and style of address. Within his own church, he was appointed chiefly to teach, serving in five seminaries, longest as Principal at Wesley College, Headingley, Leeds, and he was also called to Wesley’s chair, as President of the British Conference.

George’s star pupil (Raymond George’s own term), Geoffrey Wainwright, of Duke University Divinity School, has fulfilled a promise made to him by editing his memoirs, with notes and index, memorial tributes from several sources, and a full bibliography of his writings. George wrote one major book (Communion with God in the New Testament), and numerous articles on Methodist liturgy, systematic theology (notably on the sacraments), liturgical theology, and ecumenical issues, These memoirs exemplify his typically direct, modest, gentle and humorous manner.

For a reading of 20th–century British Methodist history, this book is indispensable, and little less so for an appreciation of world Methodism’s place in Faith and Order and other areas of ecumenism.

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