

BOOK REVIEW

Rowlands, Anna. 2021. *Towards a Politics of Communion: Catholic Social Teaching in Dark Times*

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Reviewed by Benjamin Aldous

Anna Rowlands is currently St Hilda Professor of Catholic Social Thought and Practice in the Department of Theology and Religion at the University of Durham. In this book she gives us a unique and thoughtful account of Catholic Social Teaching in an era of permacrisis. A recent recipient of the Joseph Ratzinger Foundation and Razón Abierta Institute Expanded Reason Award the book offers a rich tapestry of thought exploring the philosophical, theological and historical origins of the developing tradition of Catholic Social Teaching (CST). Rowlands herself acknowledges that the book does not aim to offer a definitive or even comprehensive account of CST but rather a way into selected parts of the tradition depending on the reader's own interest or confession. Rowlands too notes that the fundamental ideas in CST can look and feel a little worn around the edges as the notions of human dignity, the common good, subsidiarity and solidarity can at times be collapsed in meaning through their overuse or feel banal in over exposure. As a relative newcomer to the CST tradition I found the book quite dense and sinewy but nevertheless a rewarding effort and I will undoubtedly use the text as a go-to handguide when considering the value of CST in my ecumenical work with Churches Together in England reflecting on mission.

For Rowlands the church is necessarily political since it sees in scripture a call to proclaim a social vision of the human person within human and divine community – a social vision which Rowlands says is about the human person being fully alive and living out the common good. Divided into 11 chapters the first outlines the emergence of modern CST post 1891. Rowlands rightly reminds us that “CST in its modern form is as much a tarrying with the *ideas* that constitute modernity as with its concrete *practices*” (17). Drawing on Social Encyclicals and Apostolic exhortations of Popes from Leo XIII to Francis, she helps the reader to see that CST is far

from being a set and homogenous body of teaching but that each Pope brings their own particular nuance and understanding of CST. For example, in Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* the fundamental model for social order is rooted in the household or family and there is a refutation of the idea of mere contract or transaction as the basis for social justice. Francis in *Fratelli Tutti*, whilst willing to engage with liberalism as a political philosophy, is outright in his opposition to individualism.

Chapters 2 to 4 are rooted in an exploration of human dignity, first drawing on philosophical and theological sources (from Cicero to Mary Wolfstencraft) and subsequently drawing on the varying encyclicals. Chapter 3 deals with the issue of (forced) migration in and chapter 4 focuses on the questions of social and structural sin with regards to human dignity. In this chapter Rowlands helps the reader see ways in which each Pope has understood the core elements of human dignity from different angles. John Paul II, the conservative, was very uneasy about the usage of the concepts of social and structural sin simply seeing them as "the multiplication or accrual of individual sinful acts into consolidated, calcified structures" (101). Francis, on the other hand, has, during his papacy, continued to move the debate about social sin beyond a question of mere human willing to the context of political-economic relations (102) since cultures of ideologies malform human beings' perceptions of good (103). Francis has expanded notions of human dignity by drawing racism and categories around environmental degradation into the discussion being unafraid of a more wholistic vision and moving away from a personalism of conscience – an important widening.

Rowlands outlines the long tradition of of the common good in chapters 5 to 7, honestly reminding us that, "an account of the common good that lacks an overt awareness of the operation of power in history and commitment to struggle with others through forging collective identities fails" (114).

Chapters 8 to 10 deal with the body politic, subsidiarity and solidarity. I enjoyed Rowlands' chapter on the political responsibilities and understandings of Catholicism and particularly bringing the work of French social philosopher and mystic Simone Weil into the equation. Weil made an important contribution to the post-World War 2 debates in helping to counterbalance an over emphasis by Catholic intellectuals towards personalism and modern rights language. "Weil worried that Catholic intellectuals and the church were failing to spot the fundamentally problematic anthropology that undergirds both" (192). I found the synopses of the encyclicals of the Popes from Pius XII to Francis helpful. Rowlands points out that transnational themes of migration, the environment, global inequalities and degradation of democracy are key interlinked social issues for Francis, that have shaped his papacy.

I found chapter 10 on solidarity moving and Rowlands urges us to remember the complex narrative which draws us away from naivety. She remarks that “solidarity enters the modern lexicon on the slipstream of the revolutions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, expressing what had been thought of over the centuries in Christian usage as fraternity and friendship” (240). Yet the idea of solidarity, she says, has been largely secularized over the past century. She again very usefully traces the various papal understandings and use of the term in the encyclicals and other documents.

As usual, I found myself asking what the missiological implications of such a book are. Certainly, a more nuanced understanding of the major themes of CST. It helps me analyse prevailing concepts like the common good which can be bandied around with little thought on occasions. It will particularly help me in thinking more deeply about *imago Dei* and theological anthropology from the perspective of my Catholic friends and colleagues in my work with Churches Together in England. This is dense and rich – at times so dense that I found it difficult to wade through – but it presents important insights for those with patience from a distinguished Catholic theologian.

About the author

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