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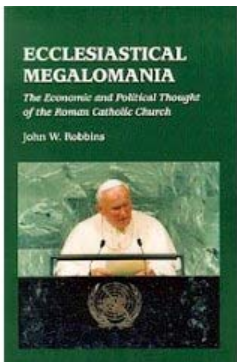
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by [John W. Robbins](#) (Author)
(4 customer reviews)

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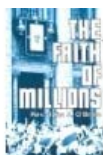
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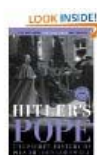
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Is the Roman Catholic Church an enemy of liberty?,

March 26, 2000

By [John S. Ryan "Scott Ryan"](#) (Silver Lake, OH) - [See all my reviews](#)

John W. Robbins says it is. And, agree or not, any reader will have to acknowledge that he makes his case with verve and vigor.

Robbins, a disciple of the late Gordon H. Clark and head of the Trinity Foundation, is also a sturdy defender of capitalism and the private-property-based social order. (He should also be better known than he is as a powerful critic of Ayn Rand's "Objectivism.")

As a sola-scriptura Calvinist, Robbins offers his defenses on purely biblical grounds -- so his work should be of tremendous interest to Christians who accept the authority of the Bible. And since he is also concerned to present the authentic teaching of biblical Christianity, this volume should be of general interest to _anyone_ who wants to know what Christianity really says about political and economic liberty.

Robbins's attack on the Roman Church's official views will no doubt cause consternation to a handful of American Catholic thinkers who have recently held that Romanism is _not_ anticapitalist; indeed, among Robbins's targets are Fr. Robert Sirico and Michael Novak.

However, Robbins presents a great deal of documentation for his view (up to and including the latest papal encyclicals at the time of his writing). It is hard to know how his critics will reply, but I shall be watching with interest.

Readers who wish to "eye before they buy" will find an excerpt from the book on the website of the Trinity Foundation; see the April 2000 review, entitled "Intellectual Dishonesty and Roman Catholic Apologetics." Fr. Sirico's Acton Institute is probably the place to go for a contrary opinion.

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Robbins takes up the considerable task of examining what the Catholic Church position on economics and politics is and has been over its 1500+ year history. He does this using church canon law, papal writings, and the writings of its intellectual Fathers like Aquinas. In other words, he uses a great deal of primary source material to justify his analysis. (Well, he uses quotes of the source material found in later anthologies, to be more precise.) To support his analysis and conclusions, Robbins also cites a breadth of commentators and critics of Catholicism both from within and outside the Church.

This is primarily a work of scholarship not a popular or religious commentary (except as noted in the "Flaws" section below). Having said that, you do not particularly have to be a scholar to understand it. Some general understanding of Church and secular history is helpful, and, if you are unschooled in theological terminology, a dictionary would be helpful.

Except as noted in the "Flaws" section below, this is primarily a work on economics and politics. Of necessity, it also addresses some issues of Church doctrine and theology, since the economic/ political theory springs in some degree from that doctrine.

The Punchline

Robbins critique' is devastating. He makes a compelling case that the intellectual tradition of Catholicism is statist, collectivist, hostile to constitutional government, friendly to fascism and totalitarian secular states, hostile to property rights, and even supportive of slavery and other human rights abuses. He further demonstrates that these were not just the positions of the ancient Roman Church, but are the intellectual currency of the Vatican through the late 20th Century.

Along the way, he provides a lot of little historical tidbits like how the claim of the Church for temporal political power is founded on a document ("The Donation Of Constantine" - reproduced in the Appendix) known to be a forgery as early as the 15th Century. Finally, and importantly, he addresses late 20th Century efforts to rewrite history and present the Church as friendly to Classical Liberal ideas.

Like many non-Catholics, I'd always assumed that the Roman Church's excesses were merely the product of unfettered power prior to the Reformation, and that it had adapted to Classical Liberal ideas in the West. Robbins demolishes this idea, and goes to some lengths to show just how hostile the intellectual underpinnings of the Church remain to Capitalist economy, property rights, separation of Church and State, and so forth. I never quite understood how an institution putatively fighting evil could stand by quietly during the Nazi atrocities or the pederasty within the priesthood. Now I get it.

Flaws

Robbins is a scholar, but he is also a devout Christian in the Westminster Confession Presbyterian tradition. In and of itself, this presents no problem. However, this book is by turns history, analysis, and polemic. The polemic is thankfully minimal, but he undermines the credibility of his scholarship when he includes footnote comments like, "the antichrist can be heard in the encyclicals of the present pope." I have no particular objection to his doctrinal observations and opinions, they are simply not segregated clearly from his historical scholarship and analysis, which is after all, what the book is supposed to be about. In weaving his theological commentary into the economic/political history, he opens himself up to the legitimate criticism that parts of the book read like a religious tract rather than pure scholarship.

In those places where he does indulge in theological observations, he does a poor job of defining terms. His use of the term "Christian" or "Scriptural" are not what most secular readers or even Catholic readers would understand them to be. I have the advantage of a pretty thorough background in Christian theology in various traditions, but if you do not, these portions of the book will seem at least strange, or more probably, inflammatory and ad hominem in nature (which I do not believe he intended).

Thankfully, this is a minor problem - the book remains primarily a historical fact gathering and critique' of Catholic economics and politics.

The other problem here is validating the analysis (I take it on faith that Robbins facts are right). I am aware of no scholarly response to Robbins claims which might refute or amend his conclusions. It would be interesting to see, for example, a Jesuit response to this book...

Finally, there is a theme taken up in the book I wish he had spent more time on. Early in the writing, he shows how our modern Classical Liberal ideas about property and personal rights sprang, in part, from the Calvinist Reformation thinkers. Furthermore, in keeping with the overall theme of the book, he goes on to say that these Classical Liberal ideas were in direct opposition to Roman Catholic thinking. I wish he would have _ended_ the book with this topic and expanded it a lot more. There is some very rich analysis to be done here, and his treatment is long on assertion, but shallow in supporting evidence. What's there is really good, but I wanted another 50 pages on this topic alone because it is not well treated in any Church History I've ever seen.

Recommendation

As I said at the outset, this is just a terrific piece of scholarship and writing. It is as about well written as something of this nature can be ... it is not an "easy" read, but it is not a dry scholastic text either. If you enjoy reading detailed histories, you should enjoy this as well. Again, I caution the devout Catholics among us - be prepared to be shocked, dismayed, and/or angry if you read this - Robbins conclusions are extremely unkind (to say the least) to Roman Catholicism, both past and present.

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It's About Time, June 7, 2000

By [Marla Perkins](#) (Ithaca, NY USA) - [See all my reviews](#)

John Robbins has done something that should have been done at least a thousand years ago--he has written a devastating critique of Roman Catholic politics and economics. Ever wonder why Britain and Germany outpaced Spain and Italy as world powers? Ever wonder why South America languishes in poverty in spite of tremendous natural and popular resources? Ever wonder how Roman Catholicism has justified its long history of brutality and dictatorship? Ideas have consequences. Robbins identifies those ideas and shows what consequences must and do derive from them. Any familiarity with world events and history will allow the reader to see that what Robbins says makes sense. Any careful scholar will find Robbins' detailed and accurate research unimpeachable.

Unfortunately, people who are so careful and so correct have not traditionally been popular with the Roman Catholic Church, and as tradition is a big part of RCC dogma and practice, I fear that Dr. Robbins may be in for a rough personal ride. With Scripture and logic on his side, Dr. Robbins may be hard-pressed and persecuted, but he will never be crushed or destroyed.

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