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Randi L. Rashkover and Martin Kavka, eds., Tradition the Public Square: A David Novak Reader

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Published within a series devoted to demonstrating ‘the rediscovery of reason as inescapably tradition constituted’ and as a ‘non-apologetic’ theological challenge to the ‘current social and political arrangements of modernity’ (pp. i–ii), this reader certainly fits well with the aims of the series editors. In general, Novak has become known to a wider audience through his work on behalf of the socially conservative First Things, an ecumenical journal published in the United States. This book, in contrast, comprises a selection of his academic articles and major works, including two previously unpublished articles (‘The Dialectic Between Theory and Practice in Rabbinic Thought’ and ‘Heschel on Revelation’). The consequence of such a selection is a refreshingly straightforward retrospective of the themes that run consistently through his oeuvre, often serving to illuminate the reasoning behind his variably ‘liberal’ or ‘conservative’ social ethics.

Indeed, though the index of titles would seem to indicate a wide-ranging collection, the themes that unite Novak’s thought actually serve to narrow the focus somewhat. As Rashkover and Kavka make clear in their introduction, Novak’s work might be seen as building upon the ‘new thinking’ of Franz Rosenzweig, wherein philosophy and theology ultimately serve as complements to each other; this perspective, in turn, provides the ideal platform from which to engage his modified views of ‘natural law’. Natural law, for Novak, is the source from which all else flows. Much like his Christian theological colleagues (Richard John Neuhaus, Stanley Hauerwas or even, perhaps, Cardinal Newman), he holds that natural law is what points toward revelation and provides that philosophy not be opposed to theology, but rather be its minimal platform; or, as Novak puts it, ‘theology presupposes philosophy, and philosophy intends theology’ (p. 19). From within this horizon, the relevant critical social commentary in which Novak trades begins to blossom, as natural law can be seen to justify a tradition bound believer’s commitment to his country (his point of solidarity), at least in so far as that country does not infringe upon the standards of natural law itself (his point of critique). It is from this angle that Novak’s work approaches first the bonds forged between modern Judaism and democratic society, and then the ‘case studies’ set within these democratic public forums, which dominate the latter portion of the collection. In Novak’s estimation, religious and secular law are closer than we might acknowledge today; indeed, for him, it is a person’s (often latent) theological commitments which have prevented democratic societies from devolving into tyrannies. The question to address to citizens of a multicultural world, then, is not whether they believe in god (the question which frames the majority of discussions concerning secularization), but whose god they are already serving (p. 184); a ‘whose’ no doubt closely akin to Alasdair MacIntyre’s inquiry concerning justice and rationality in Whose Justice? Which Rationality? (London: Duckworth, 1998).
In brief, the articles which make up this reader focus on subjects including the following: Leo Strauss on the relationship between philosophy and theology (a nuanced stance is taken by Novak); Maimonides on Islam; the themes of creation and election in relation to law and grace; Judaism in America; the role of dogma (halakhah) in Judaism; religious and secular law; individual rights in Jewish law and an examination of Noahide law as natural law. The final section proves instructive regarding the strands of natural law running throughout the contemporary social issues which face Jewish tradition in a multicultural setting (for example, capital punishment, war, marriage, abortion, sexuality and even socialized medicine); hence, once again highlighting the ever-important role of engaging with ‘tradition in the public square’.

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