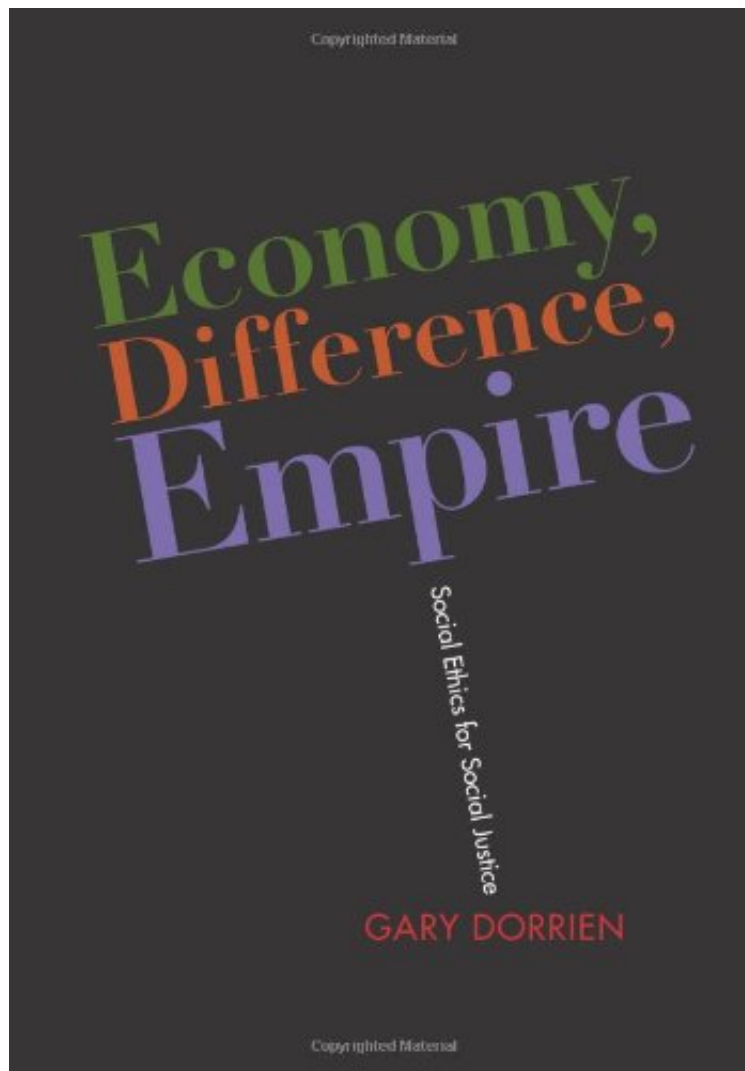


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## **Economy, Difference, Empire: Social Ethics for Social Justice (Columbia Series on Religion and Politics)**

*Gary Dorrien*

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**Gary Dorrien : Economy, Difference, Empire: Social Ethics for Social Justice (Columbia Series on Religion and Politics)** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Economy, Difference, Empire: Social Ethics for Social Justice (Columbia Series on Religion and Politics):

7 of 7 people found the following review helpful. The Way to the Future for the United States By Thomas J. Farrell Even though I do not share Gary Dorrien's Christian faith (I am a theistic humanist, as distinct from a secular

humanist), I admire his essays in this collection about progressive Christian social ethics. In *ECONOMY, DIFFERENCE, EMPIRE: SOCIAL ETHICS FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE* (2010), Gary Dorrien has reprinted a selection of his previously published writings. In some cases, he has adapted parts of two previously published works to create a new composite essay for this collection. This collection could be titled *A GARY DORRIEN READER*. Gary Dorrien is the author of more than a dozen books, including his monumental three-volume study titled *THE MAKING OF AMERICAN LIBERAL THEOLOGY* (2001, 2003, 2006) and *SOCIAL ETHICS IN THE MAKING: INTERPRETING AN AMERICAN TRADITION* (2008). Gary Dorrien is now the Reinhold Niebuhr Professor of Social Ethics at Union Theological Seminary in Manhattan. Not surprisingly, Niebuhr's thought is prominent in this collection. Because President Barack Obama claims to have been influenced by Niebuhr's thought, Dorrien's new collection can help us better understand where President Obama is coming from, as they say. But Dorrien's chapter about Obama is disappointing, to say the least. For a fuller discussion of Obama, the interested readers should see James T. Kloppenberg's book *READING OBAMA: DREAMS, HOPE, AND THE AMERICAN POLITICAL TRADITION* (2010). The title and subtitle of Gary Dorrien's collection call attention to the four groupings of essays in the collection: (1) the tradition of progressive Christian social ethics within which Gary Dorrien works, (2) economic democracy and social justice, (3) neoconservatives and U.S. empire, and (4) race and gender social justice. Gary Dorrien's new collection is a timely antidote to the recent revival of Ayn Rand's stupid ideas glorifying being self-centered and selfish, which has been spurred on recently by Rep. Paul Ryan of Wisconsin, who claims to be a Roman Catholic, and others, some of whom claim to be Christians. Gary Dorrien's new collection can serve as a timely antidote to the Ayn Rand revival by reminding us about social justice and the need to be other-regarding, not just self-regarding (as Ayn Rand stresses). Gary Dorrien tells us where he himself is coming from: "I side with the right order tradition in justice theory, which is more relational and solidaristic than the justice-as-rights views, but I share the social gospel conviction that the way beyond liberalism is through it, taking as foundational the rights of individuals to freedom of speech, association, preference, and the like, and the liberal emphasis on equality of opportunity" (p. xii). Let me dwell on the idea that "the way beyond liberalism is through it." In plain English, we should not discard liberalism, but embrace liberalism and advance liberalism and improve it. I like this thought and expression. Generally speaking, liberalism refers to liberal democracy as exemplified by American democracy and liberal economy as exemplified by American capitalism. In short, the way to the future for the United States is through liberalism, not through any alternatives to liberalism, regardless of how appealing those alternatives may seem to be. In principle, American democracy is not unbound or unregulated democracy. For example, the American experiment in democratic government is different from the experiment in participatory democratic government in ancient Athens; the American experiment involves elected representatives, so it is not an experiment in participatory democracy. Moreover, American democracy is regulated by laws, which of course can be changed from time to time. But more importantly, the overall system of American democratic governance is a carefully constructed system of checks and balances. Regarding the liberal economic order, we Americans have learned the hard way that unbound capitalism can lead to devastating results. So we should pursue government regulation of the capitalist economic system to protect the common good. To safeguard and protect the common good, we should avoid the kind of deregulation often espoused by Republicans. The Republican noise machine excels in denouncing so many things - so-called liberals (but what about libertarians - aren't they liberals?), liberalism (e.g., democracy and capitalism?), socialism, communism, Marxism, Social Security, the welfare safety net, affirmative action, legalized abortion in the first trimester, gay marriage, tax increases for the rich, health care, etc. The omni-directional denunciations of the Republican noise machine remind me of the omni-directional denunciations of Pope Pius IX (1792-1878) in "The Syllabus of Errors" (1864). In any event, whatever Republicans stand for, as distinct from all the stuff they stand against, Republicans in the U.S. House of Representatives stand with Rep. Paul Ryan of Wisconsin and Ayn Rand in favor of self-centeredness and selfishness. Gary Dorrien sees Albert Ritschl (1822-1889) as establishing the framework out of which the social gospel movement developed. Dorrien says that "the trademark liberal Ritschlian school idea of Christianity [was] as an ellipse with two centers: eternal life as the goal of individual existence and the kingdom of God as the goal of humanity" (p. 15). Got that - the goal of humanity on this earth, not in the afterlife, is the kingdom of God on this earth. Because this is a goal that we Americans can only hope to approximate as we work toward it, I would argue that it is therefore not an utopian goal, because it is not an unrealistic goal for us to strive for. The inbreaking of God's kingdom is best understood as a personal experience in one's consciousness. This kind of personal experience breaks down the kind of self-centeredness and selfishness that Ayn Rand and Rep. Paul Ryan of Wisconsin glorify. But the inbreaking of God's kingdom is not limited to Christians or even to persons of explicit religious faith. The inbreaking of God's kingdom is best understood as an experience that is open to all of human persons and as an experience that has always been open to all human persons. In his first chapter Gary Dorrien discusses the work of Washington Gladden (1836-1918), one of the early leaders of the social gospel movement. In a work published in 1893, Gladden claimed, according to Gary Dorrien, that for Jesus "the purpose of God's inbreaking kingdom was to regenerate individuals and society as coordinate interests. Gladden urged that neither form of regeneration was possible without the other" (Dorrien, p. 12). According to Gary Dorrien, Gladden urged that we are to labor as constantly and as

diligently for the improvement of the social order as for our own personal improvement. This is the kernel thrust of the social gospel movement. In Gladden's terminology, it appears that Ayn Rand and Rep. Paul Ryan of Wisconsin have not experienced God's inbreaking kingdom, because God's inbreaking kingdom breaks down our self-centeredness and selfishness. In terms of one-to-one relationships, God's inbreaking kingdom can at times enable us to experience what Martin Buber refers to as I-thou encounters. With regard to civic activities, God's inbreaking kingdom of God can enable us to experience the kind of civic friendship that Aristotle refers to. Overall, the inbreaking of God's kingdom can best be understood in Gary Dorrien's summary of Gregory Baum's thought: "The free choices of a self are co-constitutive of the self's being. By making choices, one co-determines the person that one becomes. Each person needs others to become oneself; every person comes to be through dialogue and communion with others; God is revealed in the interpersonal process of self-creation" (p. 364). This is a far cry from Ayn Rand's view. Notice how agency in decision making and communion with others are interwoven here. In his book *THE DUALITY OF HUMAN EXISTENCE: AN ESSAY ON PSYCHOLOGY AND RELIGION* (1966), David Bakan (1921-2004) calls attention to two basic human tendencies, which he refers to as the duality of human existence: (1) agency and (2) communion. In her big textbook *THE PSYCHOLOGY OF GENDER* (3rd ed. 2009), Vicki S. Helgeson works with Bakan's terminology about agency and communion. By contrast, Ayn Rand overplays agency and obliterates communion. In his book *FIGHTING FOR LIFE: CONTEST, SEXUALITY, AND CONSCIOUSNESS* (1981), the published version of his 1979 Messenger Lectures at Cornell University, Walter J. Ong, S.J. (1912-2003) focuses in effect on what Bakan and Helgeson mean by agency, which Ong refers to as contesting behavior (drawing on the Greek term "agon," meaning contest or struggle). I mentioned above the omni-directional things that the Republican noise machine stands against. In Ong's terminology, those guys have over-developed their sense of adversativeness, the sense of standing over against things. In Bakan's and Helgeson's terminology, those guys have under-developed their sense of communion with others, probably because they are not yet ready to give up the unfortunate heritages of white supremacy, male patriarchy, and homophobia. Gary Dorrien is careful to title his last chapter "Social Ethics in the Making." In plain English, we Americans have not yet worked out all that we need to work out in social ethics. Dorrien claims that "[f]rom the beginning social ethics had a twofold task: [1] to learn scientifically what IS and [2] to advocate ethically what SHOULD BE. The crucial thing was to hold together the IS and the OUGHT" (p. 397; emphasis in original as italicized type, but capitalized here). In Gary Dorrien's estimate, "The three towering figures in the U.S. tradition [of social ethics] are Walter Rauschenbusch [1861-1918], Reinhold Niebuhr [1892-1971], and Martin Luther King, Jr. [1929-1968]" (p. 398). Gary Dorrien stresses white supremacy as one unfortunate heritage that we should strive to overcome, but he also discusses male patriarchy and homophobia as other unfortunate heritages that we should strive to overcome. So much work remains to be done in American social ethics. Because the Republican noise machine likes to accentuate their understanding of American exceptionalism, I would like to point out that Gary Dorrien has detailed two exceptional American developments: (1) the development of American liberal theology, which he has detailed in his three-volume study titled *THE MAKING OF AMERICAN THEOLOGY* (2001, 2003, 2006), and (2) the development of the still emerging field of social ethics, which he has described in his book titled *SOCIAL ETHICS IN THE MAKING: INTERPRETING AN AMERICAN TRADITION* (2008). The way to the future for the United States is through American liberalism and the focus on social ethics that it helped engender. Just as the American democratic system of government has checks and balances built into it, so too the American economic system should have checks and balances built into it through government regulation because deregulation is a threat to the common good. The liberal American experiment in democratic government and the liberal American experiment in capitalist economy are experiments that call for progressive improvement. In the past, American culture has been under-developed because of the unfortunate heritages of white supremacy, male patriarchy, and homophobia. As a result, American culture in the past fell well short of being a light to the world, despite the emergence of liberal American democracy and liberal American capitalism. Today and in the future, we Americans need to strive to overcome the shortcomings of our past as best as we can, regardless of how noisy the Republican noise machine is.

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Good summary  
By Timothy Gray  
This book had a lot of interesting history that helped me make connections with current events. The fact that it is a compilation of essays and speeches given at different times was a bit distracting, but once I understood the organizational themes of the book, it became clearer. Good reading.

Sourcing the major traditions of progressive Christian social ethics: social gospel liberalism, Niebuhrian realism, and liberation theology  
Gary Dorrien argues for the social-ethical necessity of social justice politics. In carefully reasoned essays, he focuses on three subjects: the ethics and politics of economic justice, racial and gender justice, and antimilitarism, making a constructive case for economic democracy, along with a liberationist understanding of racial and gender justice and an anti-imperial form of liberal internationalism. In Dorrien's view, the three major discourse traditions of progressive Christian social ethics share a fundamental commitment to transform the structures of society in the direction of social justice. His reflections on these topics feature innovative analyses of major figures, such as Walter Rauschenbusch, Reinhold Niebuhr, James Burnham, Norman Thomas, and Michael Harrington, and an

extensive engagement with contemporary intellectuals, such as Rosemary R. Ruether, Katie Cannon, Gregory Baum, and Cornel West. Dorrien also weaves his personal experiences into his narrative, especially his involvement in social justice movements. He includes a special chapter on the 2008 presidential campaign and the historic candidacy of Barack Obama.

Through a collection of 19 essays, the gifted social ethicist not only explores the origins and heights of the social justice movement in American liberal Christianity but studies its challengers and traces its decline (*The Christian Century*). Like his previous works, *Economy, Difference, Empire* not only displays Dorrien's passion for remembering the past but also his ability to discern what aspects of the past are still valuable. He writes vividly and clearly about history, ethics, and theology, and he understands that the voices of religious and political progressivism, whose stories he loves to tell, should not be consigned to the dusty shelves of a library. (*Journal of Church and State*)

About the Author  
Gary Dorrien is the Reinhold Niebuhr Professor of Social Ethics at Union Theological Seminary and professor of religion at Columbia University. He is the author of more than a dozen books, including most recently the three-volume *The Making of Liberal Theology and Social Ethics in the Making: Interpreting an American Tradition*.