Pastoral care in a neoliberal age

Bruce Rogers-Vaughn believes that modern capitalism isn't simply anti-government. It's also anti-human and anti-church.

by Clint Schnekloth in the May 9, 2018 issue

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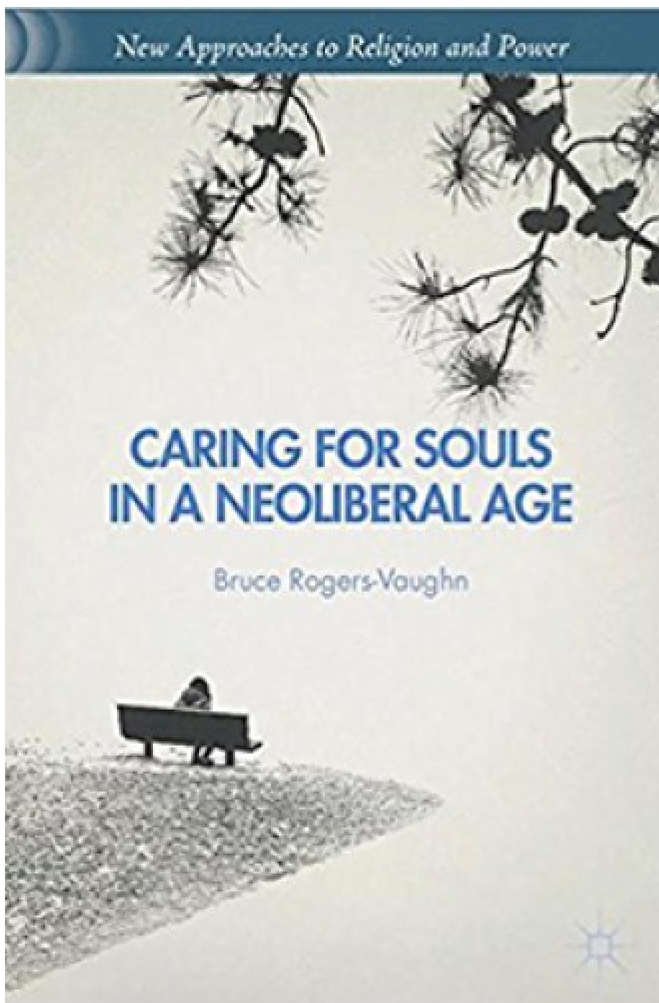

Caring for Souls in a Neoliberal Age

by Bruce Rogers-Vaughn

Palgrave Macmillan

“We live in a utopia: it just isn’t ours,” writes China Miéville, one of the great imaginative critics of contemporary capitalism. Neoliberal economics is working wonderfully for the wealthiest 1 percent. As Oxfam reports, 82 percent of all the world’s wealth went to the richest 1 percent in 2017. The world’s wealth simply isn’t for the majority of people.

Theologian and psychotherapist Bruce Rogers-Vaughn agrees. He wonders (based on a keyword search in the ATLA religion database) why theological studies have remained essentially silent on the topic of neoliberalism, while the social sciences have seen a sevenfold increase in mention of the topic between 1990 and 2014. He finds this failure unfortunate, not only because it avoids addressing a root cause of suffering but also because such silence is likely a form of collusion. Accordingly, his book offers a class-centered critique of contemporary capitalism and its devastating effect on the souls he encounters as a pastoral counselor and psychotherapist.

Neoliberalism, Rogers-Vaughn believes, is the hegemonic and all-encompassing factor in shaping why and how humans suffer. He defines it as a development in capitalism, most of whose advocates emphasize freedom, which is generally characterized by the “unimpeded functioning of markets.” It has created a “global hegemony that does not look like a hegemony, one that claims to be a liberator of humankind even as it shackles the human soul.”

Rogers-Vaughn observes a marked change in the people he sees now in his practice compared to 30 years ago. His patients are more on edge, experiencing an amorphous dread. The selves he encounters are more diffuse and fragmented, prone to greater levels of addictive behavior, haunted by shame and loneliness, unaffiliated, and burdened with many private sufferings. Through long experience and reading in critical literature, he has become convinced that such changes are the result not of individual failures but of large shifts in the form of capitalism practiced in the United States—especially shifts implemented during the 1980s, the era of Thatcher and Reagan.

The challenge of caring for souls:

> is not the effort to fix discrete personal problems or even to redress specific injustices. It is, rather, to aid people, individually and collectively,

> in finding their footing—to articulate the deep meanings that ground their lives and to strengthen healthy collectives and social movements that hold some residue of transcendent values.

Rogers-Vaughn believes that much of therapy and counseling (including pastoral care) colludes with neoliberalism. He identifies collusive care as that which emphasizes

> *adaptation* to society (rather than resistance), *functioning* in accord with the values of production and consumption (rather than *communion* and *wholeness* in relation to others and the earth), *symptoms relief* (rather than *meaning-making*), and accepting *personal responsibility* (rather than interdependent reliance within the web of human relationships).

This kind of care addresses relatively well first-order suffering (caused by the human condition, like illness or plague) and second-order suffering (caused by human evil, like war or ecological devastation). But it does not address third- order suffering, "the new chronic," still ill-defined and difficult to name but clearly present as a general malaise in the culture writ large.

Through a rigorous and expansive synthesis of the literature on neoliberalism, Rogers-Vaughn surveys where we are now with hints of where we might go. But his book is by no means a handbook. In fact, he jests, "there is no *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Neoliberal Disorders*, coupled with sets of 'best practices' for alleviating the particular distresses they produce." It's likely that he would consider any such handbook a symptom of the disease, not the cure. As he states, "caring for souls requires us to escape these small boxes in which we simply help people manage their suffering."

One small box from which we need to escape is the strategic pitting of class issues and cultural identity against each other. "Part of the success of neoliberalism consists in how effectively it has co-opted the spirit of the 1960s. . . . It accomplished this by driving a wedge between social justice efforts focused on economic fairness and those emphasizing cultural identities." This co-optation has contributed to the widespread *ressentiment* that fuels modern-day populisms.

Rogers-Vaughn's attempts to describe the care of souls post-neoliberalism are too brief. His most helpful proposal, perhaps, is an ecclesiology that envisions the

church as communities of the expelled. He believes that neoliberalism is not simply antigovernment and antiunion; it is also antichurch. “One exhibit of this broad dismantling of collectives is the continuing decline of religious institutions in the United States, a steady erosion that signifies the general *marginalization* of religious collectives under neoliberal governance.” But he sees the negative energy of neoliberalism against communities of faith as an opportunity to discover once again the core definition of communities centered in the way of Jesus.

What if the church understood itself to be the community of the expelled—all those pushed out by the many forces of neoliberalism, from nationalism to racism to classism and more? This proposal offers a compelling redress to the sense of spiritual homelessness. The expelled are not homeless at all. In the church, they are cast out together, and the care of souls occurs as the community finds life in its collective resistance.