NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Reliving Robert McAfee Brown's biblical theology

John Dear | May. 28, 2013 On the Road to Peace

It?s rare to find a theologian who roots his or her research in the Gospel of Jesus and is unafraid to unpack the challenging social, economic and political implications. One of the best was Robert McAfee Brown, a theologian and activist who died in 2001. This week, I've been reading the excellent new Orbis Books collection, *Robert McAfee Brown: Spiritual & Prophetic Writings [1]* (selected with an introduction by Paul Crowley) and feel inspired by his accessible wisdom all over again.

Brown's theology and spirituality are consistently clear and unusually straightforward. They flow naturally from the Scriptures. I consider him one of the greatest theologians of the second half of the 20th century and recommend this book and all his books to anyone seeking a clear, biblically based, justice-oriented theology and spirituality.

Born in 1920, Brown was ordained a Presbyterian minister, served as a pastor and studied at Amherst College, University of Oxford, Columbia University, and Union Theological Seminary. He taught at Union Theological Seminary, Stanford University and the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, Calif., where I first met him. He participated in a Freedom Ride, was an official Protestant observer of the Second Vatican Council, marched in Selma, Ala., and joined countless protests against the Vietnam War, nuclear weapons, and the U.S. wars in Central America. He published dozens of best-selling works, which I read and reread over the years, such as *Theology in a New Key*, *Saying Yes and Saying No and Religion and Violence*. He died in September 2001; his memoir, *Reflections Over the Long Haul*, was published several years later.

Once I discovered his writings, I was hooked. He seemed to take the Gospel seriously and tried to apply it to our current predicament. He was also humble enough to recognize the truth of liberation theology, changed his own conclusions, and sought to bring it into mainstream North American Christianity.

Brown knew how to put biblical lessons plainly. Like this: "God does not bless poverty. God does not want people to starve. God sides with the poor, the marginalized, the outcast, and the marginalized. God wants us to make justice a reality. God struggles to liberate the oppressed and the oppressors. God curses war and wants us to live in peace." These teachings made sense to me, even though few North American Christians espoused them.

In his speeches, he was equally direct and to the point. I heard him speak many times and was amazed at his simple but urgent prophetic denunciations and announcements. He was profoundly compelling.

This new volume is not an "essential writings," but rather a selection of his insights from across the spectrum of his work. He writes on Jesus, the Gospels, social justice, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Archbishop Oscar Romero, the Jesuit martyrs of El Salvador, war, human rights, sexuality, Judaism and ecumenism.

The book begins with a typically provocative piece, a statement of faith he was asked to write when he was applying to serve as a minister in a church. Here's an excerpt:

> I can summarize my faith in two words of the early church, Kurios Christos ("Christ is Lord") or in ten words of Samuel Crossman, "Love the loveless shown, that they might lovely be."
>
> 1. Scripture. I say Yes to scripture as our means of access to the story of God's people; I say No to scripture as a repository of doctrine. I say Yes to scripture as radically "good news to the poor," which can also be good news to the rest of us; I say No to the scripture as consolation apart from its radical social challenge.
>
> 2. Jesus Christ. I say Yes to Jesus, a Jew from Nazareth, who embodies the present reality of God's Kingdom as Christ; I say No to a deified Jesus whose humanity is thereby negated. I say Yes to Jesus' life, death, and resurrection not only as sources for our own individual transformation, but as points of decisive confrontation between the power of God and the power of human society that tried to destroy Jesus on the cross. God reversed all expectations by the resurrection, and Jesus' followers became citizens of a totally new order. I say No to interpretations of Jesus that reduce these events to an individualistic meaning.
>
> 3. God. I say Yes to the biblical God who shares our plight in suffering love and thereby opens the way for us to love one another; I say No to an all-powerful God who would thereby be responsible for evil, whether the murder of six million Jews or the unjust death of a single child.
>
> I say yes to the biblical God as the true God in distinction from false gods; I say No to the false gods, believing that continual No-saying to our most dangerous contemporary false god --uncritical nationalism -- is a way of saying Yes to the true God. That means saying No when our government invades other countries, breaks international law, deports political refugees to sure death, supports military dictators, and gives priority to the arms race over the needs of the poor.
>
> I say Yes to the Kingdom of God as a present possibility in this world; I say No to the Kingdom of God as only a future possibility in another world.

Brown goes on at length like this. Insightful, reasonable, brilliant and Gospel-based. I find his writings refreshing and miss his presence among us.

"This is a spirituality that claims God is actively concerned with and engaged in human affairs and the reality of creation," Crowley writes in his introduction. "This is a God who so aches to see justice accomplished and wrongs righted that God enters the human world in the person of an itinerant Jewish preacher who is rejected by religious and state authorities and strung up to die alone in a garbage dump -- a criminal's death. This is also a God who stirs hope in the hearts of those who wish to share in God's desires for the human family and for the earth and who, through the wind of the Spirit, propels them forward into the world to accomplish God's will. This is not an ethereal otherworldly God. This is the God of love, of mercy, of justice, and of peace whom Jesus proclaimed -- a God of both spirituality and politics."

This book, like Brown's others, invites us to think through our own theology and spirituality, to ponder our own experience of God, to take the Gospel seriously and to apply it to the culture of violence we find ourselves in.

We need more biblical Christians like Robert McAfee Brown. May he inspire us to read the Scriptures and take Jesus at his word.

***

To see John's speaking schedule for 2013 or to invite him to speak in your church or school, go to John Dear's website

[2]. John is now working with the Francsican-based peace group Pace e Bene [3]. He is profiled in *Doing Time for Peace [4]* by Rosalie Reigle and with Dan Berrigan and Roy Bourgeois in *Divine Rebels* [5] by Deena Guzder. John's book *Lazarus, Come Forth!* [6] and other recent books, including *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings* [7], *Put Down Your Sword* [8] and *A Persistent Peace* [9], are available from Amazon.com.

Editor's note: We can send you an email alert every time a new column in "On the Road to Peace" is posted. Go to this page and follow the directions: **Email alert sign-up** [10].

Source URL (retrieved on *07/23/2014 - 01:00*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/road-peace/reliving-robert-mcafee-browns-biblical-theology

Links:
[1] http://www.amazon.com/books/dp/1626980071
[2] http://www.johndear.org/
[3] http://paceebene.org/
[4] http://www.amazon.com/Doing-Time-Peace-Resistance-Community/dp/0826518729
[5] http://www.amazon.com/Divine-Rebels-American-Christian-Activists/dp/1569762643/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1326209314&sr=8-1
[6] http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/1570759367/ref=pd_lpo_k2_dp_sr_1?pf_rd_p=486539851&pf_rd_s=lpo-top-stripe-1&pf_rd_t=201&pf_rd_i=1584200405&pf_rd_m=ATVPDKIKX0DER&pf_rd_r=1GYTD8AM60PI
[7] http://www.amazon.com/Daniel-Berrigan-Essential-Writings-Spiritual/dp/1570758379/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1318348569&sr=1-1
[8] http://www.amazon.com/Put-Down-Your-Sword-Nonviolence/dp/0802863574/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1318348607&sr=1-1
[9] http://www.amazon.com/Persistent-Peace-Struggle-Nonviolent-World/dp/0829427201/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1318348624&sr=1-1
[10] http://ncronline.org/../../email-alert-signup