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*Deep and Wide: Reflections on Socio-Political Engagement,
Monasticism(s), and the Christian Life*

by Evan B. Howard

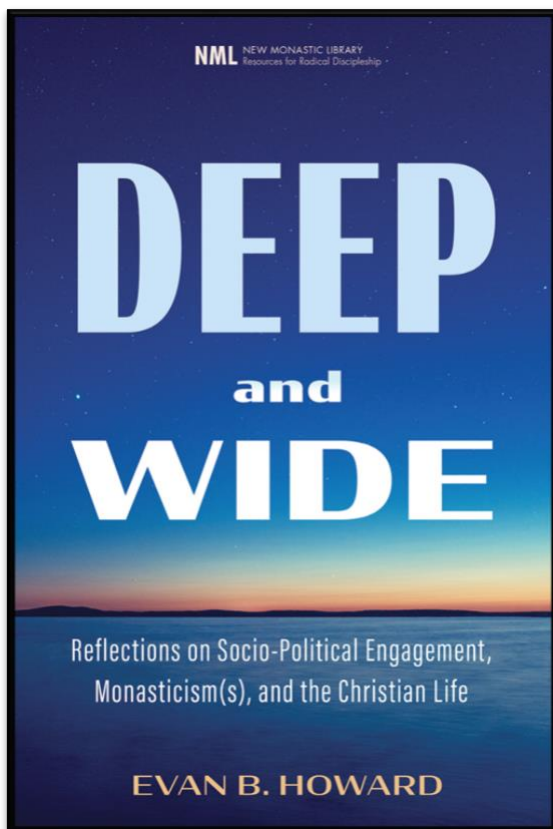
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New Title from Evan B. Howard

***Deep and Wide: Reflections on Socio-Political Engagement, Monasticism(s),
and the Christian Life***



Commitment to a life of prayer and community can prove to be a great help for those involved in politics. Rather than being distracted away from action, Evan B. Howard argues that committed Christians often find both freedom and empowerment to contribute to the greater good of the world. A review of the history of committed Christian life (monasticism) shows that devout communities have engaged in a wide range of socio-political arenas. We can explore today what nuns and monks have accomplished in the past. We can speak into political conversations. We can care for those in need. We can model new ways of ordering life together. We can take concrete political action in governmental process. We can pray. This book blends examination of history with musings about the Christian life and politics generally. It also offers a collection of monastic practices to equip communities and individuals to embody an appropriate blend of “deep” and “wide” for themselves.

Evan B. Howard is adjunct professor of Christian spirituality at Fuller Theological Seminary and the founder and director of Spirituality Shoppe: A Center for the Study of Christian Spirituality. He is the author of the *Brazos Introduction to Christian Spirituality* (2008) and other works.



“Socio-Political engagement” and “Monasticism(s)”: an odd pair. So, what led you to writing a book on this topic?

Johnathan Wilson-Hartgrove, one of the people who popularized the phrase “new monasticism,” was taking me to the airport a few years ago. As he was driving he said to me something like “You know what we need from you, Evan, we need someone to show the relationship between monasticism and action.” Jonathan was interested in action, in making a difference in the political arena, but at the same time this phrase “monasticism” seemed to encourage an escape from action. I considered his challenge worthy of my efforts, and now we have a book.

The title of the book begins with the phrase Deep and Wide. Why that phrase? What does “deep and wide” have to do with politics, monasticism and the Christian life?

First, deep and wide is a wonderful song I sang when I was in Vacation Bible School as a young child. Yet, as you will see in the book, both the song and the concept—deep and wide—become symbols for our engagement as Christian communities and individuals in the socio-political world. On the surface we might think of “wide” as referring to our political activity in the world and “deep” as referring to our spiritual life. As the book develops, however, you begin to see how deep and wide, the political and the spiritual, are inextricably bound up together.

Speaking of “politics”: People define politics in lots of different ways – voting, lobbying, demonstrations, and so on. When you speak of “socio-political engagement” what are you talking about, and what does this have to do with the average Christian (or the average nun)?

Many people think of “politics” simply as government stuff: laws and elections. Following the lead of other schools of political theory, I take a broader view: neighborhood crime watches, cooperatively-owned housing projects, and labor unions are all political activities. The various chapters in the book talk about speaking, caring, modeling, acting, praying, and living. To me, when we take steps to influence the common ordering of our life together as humans we are stepping into socio-political engagement.

This idea of monasticism and politics sounds interesting. Can you tell me a couple of stories of how folks in monasticism have engaged in political things?

I tell a lot of stories of monasticism and socio-political engagement in this book. One is about Basil the Great, a pastor and monastic leader in 4th century Turkey, who collected a bunch of people and resources together in a time of famine to establish the first hospital. After Basil, monastery-run hospitals became what we might call the Department of Health in medieval Europe. I also tell the story of the Jesuit faculty at the University of Central America, whose commitment to truth—a good idea in an institution of education—led to them being martyred for political reasons. Well, yes, I also tell a story of how Trappist monk Thomas Merton’s prayer life might have influenced the Cuban missile crisis, but that is too long a story to tell here.

Your previous books have been about spirituality and spiritual formation. Spiritual practices and spiritual experience played an important part there. But this book is about political engagement. Do you describe any spiritual practices in this book?, and if so, can you give a couple of examples?

I actually do present a number of practices in this book, one for nearly every chapter; that is part of the magic of deep and wide. One practice I introduce, early in the book, is an exercise in what I call “political self-examination.” By reflecting on the systems and structures that surround our ordinary life, we can begin, prayerfully, to understand our own location in the midst of various socio-political forces. In another chapter I teach us to do politics “the monastic way”: celebrating rhythm, welcoming repetition, giving space to the blend of outer and inner, and learning to honor the process as much as the product.

Do you have any personal stories of monastic life and socio-political engagement you can share? How have you personally worked through these issues?

Ever since Cheri, my wife, and I got married in 1978 we have made a commitment to engaging in the socio-political realm in our own small ways. We have experimented with modeling a bit, choosing to live at the federal poverty level and quarrying rocks to build our house. We have also tried, wherever we have lived, to offer some form of care for others less privileged than us. And yes, in the book I also tell the story of my participation in a political march, when to my surprise I found myself being interviewed by a news reporter.

You say that this book is a reflection on monasticism(s), in the plural. Throughout the book you not only give examples from ancient monasteries but also from contemporary “new monastic” intentional Christian communities. Can you tell me more about these communities and how they feature in this book?

I have been a student of historic Christian monasticism for many years, frequently teaching a class at Fuller Seminary on monasticism(s) old and new. I started using the term monasticism(s) in the plural because I became convinced that from the very beginning believers have explored a variety of ways of living a consecrated Christian life. I have also for years been a friend of more recently started intentional Christian communities, new monastic experiments and other similar groups. I wanted to highlight these newer groups because I see promise in them.

You also mention that this book includes reflections on “the Christian life.” That sounds like a lot. What aspects of the Christian life need to be considered when thinking about political engagement and monasticism(s), and why?

The more I did my research for this book, the more I kept bumping into “theological” issues, questions regarding the Christian life more generally. Did Jesus come to earth in order simply to die for our sins or was there something more? Why did the early church live the way it did and why did the apostle Paul and others speak about the “church” and the “world” the way they did? What does it mean to be holy, anyway; does holiness have a socio-political dimension? Thus, reflections on the Christian life.

Who did you write this book for and what do you hope they will get out of it? Or, how do you hope they will change as a result of reading this book?

I had a few groups of people in mind as I wrote this book. First, I was thinking of my friends—or shall I say heroes?—in Christian communities struggling, often times sacrificially, to engage in the socio-political arena and maintain a healthy spiritual life. My hope is that communities can find in this book pathways to sustainable, vibrant, spiritual/political lives. I also realized that some might pick up this book as students of monasticism, perhaps unaware of all the newer expressions and wondering how any of them engaged in things political. Or perhaps there might be political activists who had not imagined monastic politics. My hope is that this book could draw people to see how monasticism, community life, socio-political engagement, following Jesus, can all be wonderfully woven together.

**Excerpt from *Deep and Wide:*
*Reflections on Socio-Political Engagement, Monasticism(s), and the Christian Life***

“Justice” seems to call us to action. “Monasticism” seems to call us away from action. Was the idea of redesigning a life of prayer, community, and formation by employing wisdom of old holy people actually opening a path (perhaps unintentionally) toward political passivity? I had to figure this one out. It got interesting as I observed different groups. Were contemporary conversations regarding action, community, and contemplation replaying discussions that emerged from time to time throughout the history of monasticism? And how does this all relate to politics? Actually, the more I examined the evidence, the more I began to see the richness of God’s work through God’s people. Nuns and monks had struggled for more than a millennium with the balance of action, community, and contemplation. And in the process they discovered lots of ways to engage in social and political spheres for the cause of Christ. Consider, for example:

The citizens of Antioch in AD 387 were in the wrong. The citizens themselves recognized this. Hearing that emperor Theodosius was going to impose still another harsh tax on the city, they demonstrated. Things got out of hand and the demonstration became a riot. Some of the rioters demolished statues of the imperial family and set fire to public buildings. Imperial troops were sent in to restore order, executing rioters of the lower class. But that was not enough. Theodosius saw the desecration of his own statues as an act of treason. He closed the baths, the theatres, the sports complex. He placed Antioch, an important city in that region, under military rule, sending in troops to establish order. He sent two officials to prosecute the perpetrators of the riot. On top of all that, various members of the city council were sentenced to exile or death. This was just too much for the populous. But time was short. Before these death penalties were carried out, the city needed to persuade the imperial officials to refer the matter to emperor Theodosius himself and to allow bishop Flavian to appeal on behalf of the city.

That is when the monks of the region arrived. John Chrysostom recounts, “After so many years’ seclusion in their cells, when they saw a dark cloud hanging over the city, at nobody’s request and nobody’s prompting, they left their shacks and caves and came flooding down from all directions, like so many angels from heaven.” These monks appeared before the officials, pleading on behalf of the accused. They argued that the desecration of the emperor’s image in the statues was indeed deplorable, but to further slay the image of God in these human beings created irrecoverable damage. They appealed to the Christian faith of the emperor. “If you refuse to exercise restraint,” the monks proclaimed in a pledge of solidarity, “we shall certainly die at their side.” The officials referred the case to Theodosius and Chrysostom reports that the monks pleaded with the emperor, reminding him of God’s Judgment. The efforts of the monks, along with those of bishop Flavian and the Magister Officiorum Caesarius, succeeded. Emperor and citizens were reconciled and the polis of Antioch was restored to—a humbled—normalcy.

My conviction is that nuns and monks and friars and so on have some valuable lessons to teach us about how to let God’s fountain flow both deep and wide.

**Praise for *Deep and Wide*:
Reflections on Socio-Political Engagement, Monasticism(s), and the Christian Life**

“If, like me, you are searching for a way to remove yourself from the woke/anti-woke echo chamber, and if you are looking for a thoughtful, mature way to think about Christian participation in society, read *Deep and Wide*. Evan Howard’s exploration of monasticism as a model for socio-political engagement will indeed deepen your understanding and give you an imagination for godly and effective social action.”

—Todd Hunter, author of *Deep Peace*

“A heartfelt challenge to merge deep contemplative prayer with effective political action through pertinent philosophical musings, thoughtful biblical insights, and ancient and contemporary spiritual wisdom woven together with stories and examples—a message for our times.”

—Elizabeth Liebert, author of *The Soul of Discernment*

“The political arena attracts corrupt power seekers and sensational headline grabbers more often than people who genuinely seek truth and the common good. By contrast, I heartily commend Evan Howard’s inspiring stories of public witness for social justice and moral integrity from both ancient and contemporary Christian communities. Their witness reaches far beyond their numbers and subsequent generations continue to draw strength from their fidelity.”

—David Janzen, author of *Seven Radical Elders*

