Martin Rhonheimer, *Changing the World: The Timeliness of Opus Dei.* New York: Scepter Publishers, Inc., 2009. x + 138 pages. $14.95, cloth.

This book consists of four substantive chapters previously written as articles or addresses and brought together here in a single volume devoted to establishing and defending what the author in his subtitle calls "the timeliness of Opus Dei." Father Rhonheimer, a scholar with an impressive publication record, is a professor of moral and political philosophy at the University of Santa Croce in Rome; he is also a priest of Opus Dei.

However, this book is much more than just a competent explanation and defense of the position and orientation of the Prelature of Opus Dei in today's Church. Rather, it deals in a fundamental way with several of the most important ecclesiological questions of the post–Vatican II era, namely: toleration, freedom of conscience, religious liberty, and the freedom of the Church herself in the larger society.

The origin of and motive for the book seem to go back to a criticism of Opus Dei quoted by the author. The criticism in question alleged that since Opus Dei aims to bring about a renewed "Christian baptism of society, where there would scarcely be room for broad ideological pluralism . . . those who think differently would be excluded as heretics." In other words, the critic evidently believed that were society to go back to the positive affirmation and upholding of Christian truths that Opus Dei champions and wants to bring about, this would presumably consign or reduce those who do not believe or accept those truths to a kind of second-class citizenship or worse, and this would seemingly apply to Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, unbelievers—indeed to all non-Catholics.

Today's secular pluralism, which supposedly respects and protects the rights of all impartially—thought to be one of the most essential acquisitions of the modern democratic revolution—would presumably be canceled out by society's acceptance of Christian truth; society would then revert to something like the old state-church era in Christian history, when one of the duties of the state was to uphold when necessary against dissidents, using the full power of the secular arm, the truths taught by the dominant church (whether Catholic or Protestant following the principle of *cuius regio, eius religio*). There would thus no longer be any effective pluralism, only (possibly) toleration of those who did not accept the truths officially being upheld by society (those the critic of Opus Dei styles "heretics," in other words).

Something like this situation undeniably obtained in certain periods of Christian history. In the Catholic tradition, something like this viewpoint persisted in many minds long past the time when it reflected any reality out in the actual world; it was often expressed and summed up by the expression that "error has no rights." It was the Second Vatican Council, of course, which effectively superseded this principle and laid it aside in the Council's epochal Declaration on Religious Liberty, *Dignitatis Humanae*. While error indeed has no rights, human persons *do* have rights, the Council decided, including the right, individually and collectively, to worship God as their consciences dictate, free from coercion. This right, according to the Council's Declaration on Religious Liberty, is based on the *dignity* of the human person, as the title of the Declaration signals and as its text attests.

This right to worship free from coercion is exactly the kind of toleration that the early Christians claimed from the Roman state, which had its own "established religion" and pantheon of gods. Once Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, in and following the Constantinian era, however, it was paganism that was first tolerated and later suppressed—once the state began to enforce Christian orthodoxy.

Along the way in Christian history, there were applications of this state enforcement such as the coercion imposed upon the rebellious Donatists, which St. Augustine agreed with because the Donatists had themselves resorted to violence. In the Middle Ages, the same kind of application was thought to justify the punishment and even execution of heretics—because they poisoned the wells of Christian truth to the detriment of all the faithful and of Christian society itself. The words of Jesus himself in the parable that bystanders could be "forced" to "come into" the banquet (cf. Luke 14:23) were cited by some to justify coercion in support of religious truth. While it was also always recognized that faith had to be a free act, and Jews and Muslims, for example, were not coerced to believe in Christianity, it was nevertheless both honestly and sincerely believed within Christendom that Christians could and should be coerced if necessary, if they embraced heresy or error.

The same basic idea developed to the point where, in the nineteenth century, pontiffs such as Gregory XVI, Blessed Pius IX, and Leo XIII employed language from time to time that seemed to deny any legitimacy to freedom of conscience—since this could so easily lead to religious indifferentism and the placing of error on the same level as the truth. This was long seen to be inadmissible.

Vatican II's *Dignitatis Humanae*, however, changed the terms of the whole issue by moving away from the question of whether or not "error" had any "rights" to the very positive truth that human beings definitely do

have rights, and one of them is the right to religious freedom—just as the early Christians had claimed against the Romans.

This whole subject is what Father Rhonheimer expertly treats in this book in a much more detailed, documented, and nuanced way than is possible in the bare (and simplified) summary given here. The subject is actually quite complex with not a few side issues arising as well. However, Father Rhonheimer has a clear grasp of both the subject matter and the appropriate sources, and hence his discussion of the important issues of tolerance, freedom of conscience, religious liberty, and the freedom of the Church are well and aptly—though concisely—treated in this book.

His aim throughout is not merely to vindicate Vatican II's turn to religious liberty, however, but as the title of his book suggests, to show that Opus Dei's position on the same general subject not only accords with, but in some ways, preceded, Vatican II's basic turn. He quotes numerous sayings of Opus Dei Founder St. Josemaría Escrivá to this effect, and in particular he returns several times to a 1967 homily of the saintly founder of Opus Dei, entitled "Passionately Loving the World." As Father Rhonheimer shows, St. Josemaría clearly embodied the spirit of openness to the world (in the good sense) that Vatican II was later to adopt.

This is not exactly the reputation that Opus Dei or its founder have always enjoyed, but Father Rhonheimer nevertheless makes his case quite convincingly. I am not a member of Opus Dei, though I have friends, both priests and laity, who are, and I concluded the reading of this book with the conviction that Opus Dei's typical "bad press" seems not to be based on facts or reality but rather to be the creation of the organization's enemies.

Thus, as the critic quoted by Father Rhonheimer envisaged, if society in general were somehow to enjoy the Christian re-baptism said to be desired by Opus Dei, those who think differently and reject Christian truth would *not* thereby be "excluded" as "heretics." Rather, in accordance with the theory and practice of both Vatican II and Opus Dei, their consciences would continue to be respected because of their human dignity. There would be no reversion to the old exclusions on the theory that "error has no rights."

On the contrary, Vatican II actually provided society with the correct answer to the question of how to achieve an effective pluralism. The current secular variety of pluralism that supposedly protects the rights of all impartially by prescinding from any truth does not, in fact, protect those rights—as we are increasingly seeing in the kinds of coercion of consciences, particularly with regard to the life issues, that today are thought to be entirely acceptable, indeed mandatorily called for. Another name for this secular pluralism, in fact, is "the dictatorship of relativism," the very

phrase made famous by Pope Benedict XVI on the eve of his election to the papacy. This kind of so-called "pluralism" is *not* protecting the rights of all impartially today, but seems to be slowly leading society towards an unmistakable new brand of what some have called "soft despotism." Father Rhonheimer's analysis of what religious liberty and freedom of conscience really consist of could not be more timely.

One final point of interest about this excellent and competent book by Father Rhonheimer needs to be mentioned: as most people know, one of the principal reasons for the schismatic-type separation from Church unity of the traditionalist Society of St. Pius X is the belief of SSPX adherents that Vatican II erred specifically in its teaching on the subject of religious liberty. Father Rhonheimer does not touch upon this subject as such in the book at all. Nevertheless, his arguments and citations constitute one of the more convincing treatments anywhere in print today showing that Vatican II did *not* err in its teaching on religious liberty, but rather, as Pope Benedict XVI himself has observed, the Council returned to more authentic foundational Christian doctrinal roots in setting forth the teaching of *Dignitatis Humanae* calling for freedom from coercion in religious matters, just as the first Christians justly claimed the same freedom from the Roman state. The author's copious citations in German and Italian will be of great interest to anyone concerned with this particular subject.

Kenneth D. Whitehead
Fellowship of Catholic Scholars

***Fertility and Gender: Issues in Reproductive and Sexual Ethics.* Edited by Helen Watt. Oxford: Anscombe Bioethics Centre, 2011. 220 pages. $40, paper.**

The Anscombe Bioethics Centre (until 2010, the Linacre Centre for Healthcare Ethics) has just released its first book under its new name. *Fertility and Gender* addresses issues in marital and sexual ethics, reproductive ethics, the virtue of chastity, population growth, and same-sex attraction. It is quite interdisciplinary, with essays by philosophers, theologians, economists and psychologists. Taken together, these essays map out a fairly tight-knit and coherent family of well-argued positions on a variety of extremely contested issues; as such, the book makes a significant contribution to recent debates.