

REVIEW ESSAY

## Catholicism, Pluralism and American Democracy

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The subfield of religion and politics, just like other subfields, was founded on the shoulders of giants who came before us. These seminal thinkers sometimes disagreed with each other, but their quarrels also opened new avenues for further discussion. Max Weber argued, for instance, that Protestant dominant countries develop faster and more effectively than Catholic ones because of their dynamic work ethic. The spirit of Protestantism, Weber believed, promoted values such as entrepreneurialism and creativity, which facilitated the rise of democracy, all while the ethos of Catholicism lagged behind. Alexis de Tocqueville, on the other hand, had a different opinion about the compatibility of democracy and Catholicism. Traveling throughout the United States, he observed that Catholics—with their emphasis on hierarchy, obedience, and top-down dissemination of teaching—were well predisposed to internalize American laws and regulations. Such predispositions, in turn, helped stabilize the still nascent American democracy. While both thinkers were concerned with the compatibility of Catholicism and democracy, they ended up reaching different conclusions about the matter. In many ways, their disagreement is still not resolved, but two recent books made important contributions to these ongoing debates.

Peter Cajka's *Follow Your Conscience* is an original and encompassing contribution to scholarship on Catholicism in the United States. For much of American history, Catholics have been viewed with suspicion, and even as recently as 1950s some public intellectuals worried about the collective tendencies of Catholicism and its possible fusion with communism (17). The dominant narrative—facilitated by both scholars and general public alike—explained the fruitful co-existence of religion and democracy in America essentially through an extension of Weber's thesis. It is against this backdrop, that Cajka's contribution turns most of this dominant narrative on its head. The author persuasively demonstrates that the Roman Catholic Church has contributed to American individualism, making pluralism and democracy more vibrant in the process. In fact, with its theological emphasis on the importance and primacy of conscience in decision-making, the Catholic Church is presented as a protagonist in the struggle to secure and then protect individual rights and freedoms. Cajka traces the roots of these developments back to 13th century, when Thomas Aquinas re-worked a series of teachings which emphasized the importance of religious subjectivity (19). Aquinas' theology was an attempt to resolve the tension between law and consciences and a justification for why, in certain situations, the latter should be favored.

Centuries later, this tension—between what the Church would perhaps call objective teachings and their subjective interpretations—propelled the American Church to assert itself into the sphere of politics and even challenge the authority of the state. Cajka demonstrates these events through a rich analysis of specific legal problems. From mass conscription through draft laws to sexual ethics, American Catholics have tried to resolve these issues, consequently making pluralism and individual freedoms more robust. These battles, however, had the unexpected effect of fragmenting the Church from within—defending the right of conscience publicly meant suffering the consequences internally.

*Follow Your Conscience* has a number of appealing features which make it a valuable contribution to the scholarship on religion and politics in America. On the one hand, the manuscript clearly is a very well researched piece of scholarship. The overall orientation of the book is qualitative, but the author manages to tie contemporary political issues to their historical antecedents and to Catholic doctrinal teachings. In doing so, Cajka brings theology and its cousin, political theory, back into the study of contemporary American events, demonstrating that fusion of different pockets of social sciences is not only possible, but can also be very fruitful. On the other hand, the book underscores the plasticity of some Catholic teachings as they develop and mature across ages. The impulses shaping Catholic stance about conscience are many and varied. Some of them, such as Thomas Aquinas' theology, come from within the institution. But the American Church also internalized many outside trends and resources, making use, for example, of Jewish psychoanalysis and contemporary psychology to bolster its stance.

The conflict between objective and subjective, between law and spirit, simultaneously drove the Church politically and divided it internally. The paradox was that obedience to conscience was invoked to undermine the authority of the state, but was rejected by conservative Catholics when applied to internal teachings of the Church (43). The resulting interior fragmentation of the institution was costly. It pinned radical priests against their orthodox bishops, causing a sort of war of attrition with extensive damage on both sides. These two opposing forces continue to produce a semi-equilibrium within the Catholic Church, while the conflict between them seems to be impossible to reconcile. The key question for the future of this conflict is this: Which of these two camps presents a more legitimate interpretation of Catholic theology? Clearly, if one side is able to tilt the theological argument in their favor, the institutional behavior of the Church will be affected for the years to come. Here, then, lays the biggest unresolved puzzle of the book, because while the author appears to have collected enough evidence to offer at least a tentative answer to this crucial question, he stops short of doing so.

When reading Cajka's narrative, my impression is that the institutional balance of the Church seems to be shifting in favor of the conservative side with its emphasis on the objectivity of Catholic teachings over their subjective interpretations. There is certainly an organizational element to this battle. Such was the case, for example, when Cardinal O'Boyle suspended dissenting priests. Such tactics, however, were bound to completely backfire, if they had not enjoyed solid theological support. But they did. Cardinal O'Boyle, after all, "pursued a legitimate interpretation of the doctrine" (119). Analogous evidence in favor of the conservative interpretation is scattered throughout

the book. Thus, when the author offers his own reading of Pope Francis's apostolic exhortation on family life, *Amoris Laetitia* (*The Joy of Love*) and writes that "following conscience can make divorce and remarriage a reasonable act and keep a Catholic who chooses these ends in the good graces of the church" (191), he appears to be overstepping the empirical boundaries of his own analysis. That is the case because Cajka himself recognizes that the theological defense of the primacy of Catholic teachings issued by Pope John Paul II and Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger remains intellectually potent and effectively unanswered by the other side (184–87).

Although *Follow Your Conscience* is primarily about American politics, parts of the book are bound to have global impact. Consider the case of evaluating Pope Francis's pontificate. Many individuals, both within and outside the Church, continue to present him as a radical reformer who potentially can update Catholic teachings by making them more liberal. However, we are almost 10 years into the Francis's pontificate and the evidence in support of such views is limited at best. Perhaps Pope Francis is encountering a massive internal opposition to his agenda. But there exists another possibility—that such an agenda simply does not exist. The fact that Francis is a Jesuit by training is not insignificant. The Jesuits are known for their rigorous theological formation and for spearheading the counter-reformation in Europe, while also spreading Catholicism to the farthest corners of the world. Indeed, they have been long accused of supporting "the sacrament of confession in a concentrated effort to snuff out the subjective dimension of moral decision-making" (175). Another Jesuit, John Ford, essentially single-handedly convinced Pope Paul VI to disapprove the use of the Pill despite the official approval of the Pontifical Commission for the Study of Population and Births (92). Ford also aided Cardinal O'Boyle in his theological battle against the radical priests (113). To be sure, there exists a heterogeneity of opinions and approaches even within the Society of Jesus, but these individual and group preferences are contained within the broader parameters of Catholic doctrine. When people continue to envision that Pope Francis is a liberal trojan horse inside the Vatican, they disregard much of the Jesuits' history, which in this case can be quite informative. Cajka's book, among other things, should force us to re-think these widely circulating narratives.

Rather than focusing on the American Catholic Church in general, *Catholic Activism Today* by Maureen K. Day provides a sweeping account of how one Catholic group behaves in the American socio-political setting. From its humble beginnings in Louisville in 1989, JustFaith Ministries (JFM) has evolved into a nationally recognized organization creating educational curricula aimed at promoting peace and justice, which in turn makes the organization attractive to progressive Christians (43). While ecumenical by design, the organization is unmistakably Catholic in its orientation, but has never operated under the control of diocese (44). This, in turn, makes JustFaith Ministries a prime example of an organic institutional development in a pluralistic American setting. Day's book, too, is impressive in its scope. She manages to deliver a detail-oriented account of how the JFM group formed, developed, and evolved from the moment of its inception until present. Furthermore, the author collected and analyzed an impressive amount of qualitative data, giving the reader an almost tangible taste of what JFM is all about—at times, we can almost feel like we are personally taking part in one of the group's meetings. The qualitative focus of the

book is also nicely supplemented by descriptive quantitative data and the end result is a painstakingly researched narrative of a key Catholic organization in America.

Even though Day's analytical focus is on one Catholic organization, her manuscript helps us better understand both the group's internal dynamics and the larger setting in which it is embedded. On the one hand, it becomes apparent that institutional leadership was crucial for the formation and development of JustFaith Ministries and the group benefited greatly, especially early on, from the hierarchal organization of the Church, which helped spread JFM's mission and activities (17). On the other hand, however, we learn that the need and mission of the Catholic Church in America has changed over its 500 years of history in the country (23). That is why the Church employed different modes of engagement appropriate to different historical periods. But regardless if we look at the republican style (1750–1820), the immigrant style (1820–1920), or the Evangelical Catholicism style (1920–1960) of engagement, the common denominator of all three of them is that they operated on a problematic duality. The duality in question separated Catholic faith from American patriotism, precluding the possibility of aligning private beliefs with public actions. Today, however, a new style of engagement has emerged. The author calls it the discipleship style of engagement and its purpose is to seek social change thorough the transformation of individuals (37). This new style of political activity offers many new advantages, but perhaps the most important one is that Catholic activists no longer have to play a zero-sum game between their American and Catholic loyalties. Instead, both sources of identity can co-exist side by side and be used to promote peace and greater social justice.

Day's identification and description of the discipleship style activism has the potential to re-frame many crucial debates in American politics today by offering us a new conceptual frame of references. Recent hearings for Supreme Court nominees, for example, have been reduced to a little more than a political sideshow. Consider that during their time in the Senate, the soon to be justices do not disavow their religious commitments, but energetically and consistently deny that such sentiments will affect their future legal decisions. The implicit assumption here is that religious and political identities can and should be kept separate. Because this line of questioning is so ubiquitous, the nominees' answers are both predictable and uninformative. The discovery of the discipleship style of engagement should help us re-think how to better interpret what the future Supreme Court members are actually saying. And if some of the senators pick up a copy of *Catholic Activism Today*, they might even start asking better questions.

Another interesting aspect of the book is that it underscores the key role of doctrinal teachings for JFM's organizational means and strategies. On the face of it, JFM looks like a progressive Catholic organization whose goals might not be in line with what the Church teaches about key moral issues of the day. But the paradox here is that the organization is indeed progressive, and yet it remains faithful to Catholic doctrine. The author reports, for instance, that "81% of [JFM] Catholic grads, compared to 70% of Catholics nationally, say that the church's teaching on abortion is somewhat or very important to them" (177). Furthermore, qualitative interviews corroborate the assessment that JFM members are faithful to Catholic theology (178–80). Overall, the author argues that JFM's defense of its organizational mission and

activities does in fact fall in line with Catholic orthodoxy (51–2). One of the originalities of this manuscript, therefore, is a demonstration of how values we often consider as conflicting can sometimes fruitfully co-exist in certain organizational settings.

*Catholic Activism Today* offers many valuable lessons, but the main takeaway of the book, which is that “[a]lthough JFM may be successful by many measures, such as getting programs into parishes and creating a sense of community among participants, the personalist emphasis distracts from and even undermines the organization goal of attaining structural change” (3), is hugely problematic. The issue with such assessment is that it simply does not follow from the analytical contents of the manuscripts, but it is difficult to locate the precise source of such inconsistency. The author seems to be assuming *a priori* that justice is realized more effectively when people work in groups rather than individually (229). But this assumption is not self-evident enough not to require proper justification. In fact, one of the key lessons from political science research is that the opposite is true—every institution (i.e., social structure) is human made. It is true that once established, the relationship between macro-level structures and individual people is reciprocal—people create institutions and later institutions shape human behavior. That is why analytically rigorous accounts of institutional emergence, change, and efficacy will ultimately have to be linked to micro-level decisions of key political agents. Interestingly enough, JFM’s founder, Jack Jezreel, intuitively understands this dynamic, especially when stating that: “I’m not gonna care about the structure unless I care. Where does caring happen? We start with a book like *Compassion*, or *Tattoos on the Heart*, which is all about these one-on-one interactions” (200). The book is full of similar personalistic accounts, which the author faithfully reports and ultimately downplays because the working assumption seems to be that structural change requires collective action.

Perhaps lack of proper operationalization of the outcome of interest is to blame. I am far from suggesting that stiff quantitative framework should be imposed on projects using mainly qualitative methods, but specifying in advance how the outcome of interests looks like would help us better judge if JFM’s activism is successful or not. Since the overarching narrative of the book is that JFM is not good at materializing structural justice, what the group members are actually doing is discounted against what the author thinks they should be doing. For instance, rather than assisting people by preparing food for them or helping with their laundry, it is suggested that JFM activists might achieve greater success by initiating letter-writing campaigns (230–1). But what is feeding the hungry if not a very tangible remedy of a social injustice? Furthermore, if such actions are repeated overtime and multiplied across many individuals, then perhaps indeed we are observing structural change? Ultimately, the author is so committed to the assumption that micro-level action is not enough to usher structural change, that the scale and impact of many individual actions is overlooked. The problem, in short, is that the assumption becomes the conclusion. My reading of the evidence included in *Catholic Activism Today* is that JFM is not only trying to promote social justice, but the group is also quite effective at doing so.

If we return to the writings of Max Weber and Alexis de Tocqueville, we will find that indeed, they have reached different conclusions about Catholicism and its significance for democratic societies. Both authors, however, understood just how important Catholic theology is. Arguably, it is from this recognition that their analysis

flows. Cajka's and Day's books continue this line of scholarly investigation. The intriguing fact about the U.S. setting is that it is still a laboratory of innovation and change. It is interesting to observe how the oldest contemporary democracy interacts with a very experienced and durable religious tradition such as Catholicism. The relationship between the two is necessarily adversarial, but that does not preclude the possibility of compromise. Still, as these two forces continue to negotiate their relationship, other countries and religious traditions are paying close attention to potential lessons that can be drawn from this experience. The contribution of *Follow Your Conscience* and *Catholic Activism Today* is that they help us do exactly that.

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