

## BOOK REVIEWS

**CATHOLIC ACTIVISM TODAY: INDIVIDUAL TRANSFORMATION AND THE STRUGGLE FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE.** By Maureen K. Day. New York: New York University Press, 2020. 320 pp. \$39.00 hardcover.

In *Catholic Activism Today: Individual Transformation and the Struggle for Social Justice*, Maureen K. Day studies primarily Catholics (though some Protestants) who are graduates of the Catholic program JustFaith Ministries (JFM). Founded in 1989, JFM operates in small groups in local parishes that facilitate shared learning and experiences around social justice and Catholic social teaching. Day's rich method documents the strengths and limitations for civic engagement through in-depth interviews, a multiyear ethnography, and survey responses.

Building on the scholarship of historian David O'Brien who offered three historical ways Catholics have understood their relationship to the public sphere (republican, immigrant, and evangelical respectively), Day offers what she calls the "discipleship model." This ecclesial model, borrowed from the theological work of Cardinal Avery Dulles, sees the church as a gathering community that is fed through liturgy to be sent back to make the world a better place (107). JFM, grounded in Church teachings, brings Catholics together to transform their faith and be called to the work of justice. Strengthened by the relationships in the group, they go out to engage in charity and justice works in their communities. This model is not unique to JFM, she suggests, but is common to other Catholic movements today like Ignatian Volunteers, Opus Dei, and Sant'Egidio (38).

In identifying JFM as a discipleship group, Day helps her readers identify how this and other Catholic groups create a way to be American and Catholic in the 20th and 21st centuries. As an American group, the discipleship group helps "participants make their faith the foundation of their lives and, building from there, putting that faith into the world both personally and socially" (4). The program follows

orthodox Catholic teaching; this allows JFM to be endorsed by organizations like Catholic Charities and established in local parishes. It uniquely builds on the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults (RCIA) program for adults to learn about the Catholic faith and become Catholics themselves. Like the RCIA program, JFM focuses on experiences rather than facts or statistics. This demonstrates one of Day's crucial findings: JFM's style of building strong relationships and learning through direct experiences (immersion trips) or indirect experiences (reading stories rather than facts) ironically constrains the goal that the graduates will be engaged in social activism. While graduates understand poverty and other social problems to be structural rather than individual as well as Catholic social teaching's call for justice, nevertheless their training in experiences led them to view people in poverty as individuals (222–3). Consequently, when discerning how to act for justice after the program, they engaged in individual charitable responses.

Second, Day offers a strong contribution to sociology's understanding of the interaction between individual Catholics, meso-level Catholic groups like parishes, and the Church hierarchy. Since the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), American Catholics have increasingly taken ownership over their own formation of consciences and Catholic faith. Her findings from JFM demonstrate that while the Church hierarchy can influence Catholic faith development (e.g., by endorsing JFM as orthodox teaching), "[t]he discipleship style, situated in an organizationally weaker church and amid a society with strong individualist mores, leaves public action to individual discernment" (225). Through engagement with Catholic social teachings, these Catholics deepened their faith in ways that often results in heightened agreement with the official Church on social issues. This might be an opportunity for the Church, however. In cultivating the discipleship model locally, they might create spaces for Catholics to debate and disagree and perhaps eventually come around to Catholic belief. It would be interesting to see how other discipleship groups interact with and against the hierarchical structure of the Church, if the hierarchy directly forms any of these groups, and to

what end each group exists. A study like this would expand what we know about Catholic relationships to both the hierarchy and the public sphere in the United States today.

While Day undertook a comparative study, she herself notes that 99 percent of the participants in her study were Catholic. A future study might examine Protestant JFM groups in more depth, exploring the ways the Catholic nature of the program may enable or constrain receptivity to the social teachings. Additionally, looking at non-JFM Protestant and Catholic discipleship groups might help us understand if there are American discipleship models that succeed in collective justice work. Is there a model of discipleship groups that allow people to take what they learn and act in concert rather than as individuals on separate projects?

In conclusion, Day should be commended for an excellent book that contributes to a great legacy of Catholic sociology of religion. At the same time, the findings and questions raised above suggest that *Catholic Activism Today* could be helpful not just for sociologists, but for pastoral programs, church planning offices, seminaries, and schools of theology and ministry across the country.

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**THE WEALTH OF RELIGIONS: THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF BELIEVING AND BELONGING.** By Rachel M. McCleary and Robert J. Barro. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019. vii + 199 pp. \$29.95 cloth, \$21.95 paper.

Driving down main streets of America, it is common to see former churches—some repurposed into restaurants, day cares, and yoga studios, while others are boarded-up. At the same time, new places of worship open with huge buildings and expansive parking lots. What causes these changes? Are the changes a result of shifting religious popularity? Are the changes unique to the United States, or are they happening all over the world? This intersection of religion and economics is explored by the

husband-wife team of Robert Barro and Rachel McCleary in *The Wealth of Religions: The Political Economy of Believing and Belonging*. The book is 25 years in the making and includes findings from their long-running seminar series at Harvard University.

*The Wealth of Religions* is an economics book in the free-market tradition—Adam Smith’s market-based approach and its modern equivalents. Reliance on Smith shows up early—the title is a stylized version of the most famous book in economics and the first chapter is called “Religion—It’s a Market.” Another tenet of markets, Utilitarian philosophy, is recognized when economist George Stigler describes religious activities as “transactions which are voluntary and repetitive” and viewed as utility-providing services (p. 6). With that foundation, McCleary and Barro develop five themes: measuring religiousness, religion and economic growth, state religion, religious extremism, and religious competition. I will address each in turn.

A good place to start is by considering “religiousness.” McCleary and Barro use two measures of religiousness. First, religion is a matter of beliefs. They say, “religion offers unique beliefs about the transcendent” (p. 15). If one believes that transcendent beings affect humans, then religiousness exists through the channel of “believing.” Second, they measure attendance at places of worship. If one attends religious services then religiousness exists through the channel of “belonging” (p. 26). Believing and belonging are correlated but not quite the same—a distinction which matters later.

The book then explores how religions affect economic growth, drawing heavily from Max Weber’s early 1900s model in “The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism.” This well-known book postulated that honesty, thrift, and a sturdy work ethic form the foundation of production and trade. These wholesome attributes were common among 18th century Protestants which, according to the theory, allowed them to flourish during the Industrial Revolution. Formidable growth of several western economies, especially Germany and the United States, gives evidence to support this idea. Although Weber thought the Protestant