

Curt Cadorette. *Catholicism in Social and Historical Contexts: An Introduction.*
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Reviewed by Katie Oxx

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Curt Cadorette is a Maryknoll priest and professor of American Catholicism at the University of Rochester. In previous work, he's edited a liberation theology reader, an introduction to the theology of Gustavo Gutierrez (about whom he also contributed an essay for a *festschrift*), and published numerous articles on the Latin American church. His commitment to liberation theology has led him to work and live in Peru for many years and inspired his widely regarded scholarship in the field. With *Catholicism in Social and Historical Contexts*, Cadorette hopes to "help students better grasp the long and rich history behind the church's position on social issues" because, as he rightly notes, many students are simply unaware of it or know only a few teachings (p. ix). From the outset, Cadorette is forthcoming about his enthusiasm toward the topic at hand, and evenhandedly observes that the church "sometimes gets it right, and sometimes gets it wrong" (p. x). His aim, however, is to provide students with "a few good morsels" to wrestle with the church's history, and he accomplishes this

goal and then some. The text is a succinct, well-organized, and spirited introduction to Western Catholic history.

Catholicism in Social and Historical Contexts is divided into eight chapters of about thirty pages each. Cadorette begins with historical context, highlights one key idea in a number of subsections, and ends by connecting the era to the church's evolving social thought. The text is sparsely footnoted, a major plus for undergraduates, but debates and relevant works are appropriately cited where necessary, which will please their instructors.

Professor Cadorette begins with the chapter "Jesus, Justice, and God's Reign," which utilizes the "Jesus to Christ" model effectively. The chapter identifies the social and political movements of first-century Palestine and the various Jewish communities' motivations and strategies vis-à-vis the Roman occupation. He also presents the different methodologies scholars use to approach the gospels and how that shapes the Jesus they

discover. Proto-Christian communities' debates, what is known of Paul's life, and the reinterpretations of Jesus in light of a postponed *parousia* are succinctly explained as well.

The second chapter turns to the spread of Christianity. In "The Slow March to an Imperial Church," the reader learns of emergent Christological debates and apologetics being developed by early theologians and biblical scholars in dialogue with their surrounding culture. The advent of monasticism as separatist (and misogynistic) illustrates the polarization Cadorette highlights throughout the text between Christians who are engaged in and with the world and those who reject it, which is a significant fault line for liberation theologians.

Chapters 3 and 4 take a decidedly biographical turn. The title of chapter 3, "Augustine and the Complexities of Genius," immediately reveals the "passion" Cadorette mentioned in the preface. He bestows the same somewhat problematic descriptor to Thomas Aquinas and Francis of Assisi in chapter 4, which juxtaposes their biographies and thought. Aquinas's systematic theology and understanding of natural law are linked to contemporary questions about sexuality, and his social theory is connected to repressive practices in Catholic history, though in Cadorette's estimation, it should and could have led the church to act for justice. Francis of Assisi, by contrast, is presented in the chapter as a strange fellow, a quirky foil to the intellectual Aquinas. Cadorette makes much of the "semi-fanatics" who were Francis's followers and his "countercultural" disposition (pp. 107-111). As in his sketch of Augustine, Cadorette leans toward a psychoanalytic interpretation of Francis's conversion experience and erratic behavior, attributing these to the "growing but still unconscious resentment toward his father" (p. 105). In the end, though, Cadorette claims that the legacy of Francis of Assisi has a "timeless quality" that "forever changed the nature of Catholicism and its role in the world" (pp. 114-115).

Chapter 5, "Reforms and Revitalizations," covers the schisms and reform movements in the sixteenth-century Western church as they pertain to the development of Tridentine Catholicism. The conflicts of the era are rightly presented as wide-ranging, with theological, geographical, political, social, and economic issues all playing a role. The Council of Trent, therefore, emerged as an unequivocal response to such multifaceted uncertainty. Professor Cadorette surmises that the council might be called "truth in a straightjacket," but admits it was a success in its dual aims to both counter the claims of reformers and to clearly define and "clean up" the Catholic Church (p. 143). Ignatius of Loyola and the Jesuits are featured in the chapter as key players in this strategy.

The growing divide between liberal and conservative factions in the Catholic Church as well as the rift between religious and secular worldviews outside of it shape chapter 6, "The Ambiguity and Challenge of Modernity." Professor Cadorette stresses that then, as now, a range of perspectives existed in the church, and examines the attempts by the hierarchy (notably Pius IX) to reel in and "marginalize ... progressive members of the clergy" in its demand for obedience (p. 161). The Syllabus of Errors and the doctrine of papal infallibility are discussed, and the latter in particular is carefully unpacked since as Cadorette rightly notes, it is frequently misunderstood. The chapter ends with a discussion of *Rerum novarum* as exemplary seminal Catholic social teaching and as a valid response to the economic and social inequities that have vastly increased since Leo XIII's 1891 encyclical.

The Second Vatican Council is the subject of chapter 7, "Reassessment and Regeneration." Cadorette outlines how in the years leading up to the council, theological disputes changed or were no longer relevant. The world had become incredibly violent. U.S. imperialism was spreading. The postcolonial era was beginning to challenge the cultural supremacy of the "West" to define the

Catholic Church. “Unlike Vatican I with its defensive and sometimes hostile tone toward the larger world,” Cadorette claims, “the Second Vatican Council was about listening and responding to a world in need of hope” (p. 185). Cadorette describes the council as a massive logistical undertaking, and the multicultural, progressive, optimistic tone set by John XXIII. He singles out *Lumen Gentium* and *Gaudium et Spes* from the sixteen documents of the council for deeper analysis. Crucially, he stresses that the meaning and consequences of the Second Vatican Council are still being debated, a task that will “probably take a century or more” to complete (p. 199). Was it merely a “fine-tuning” of the church or was the council a “watershed event” that led to a “new form of Catholicism” (p. 218)? A little bit of both, is Cadorette’s answer. What is most important for him about Vatican II, though, is the “creativity and imagination” that began to come from those in the developing world and how “a new ethical and theological category was necessary—structural sin” (pp. 219- 220). Thus, social justice and contextual theology came to the fore, and the people of the church, rather than political connections, were now of primary importance.

The final chapter, “Dialectical Engagement,” traces Catholic history from after the Second Vatican Council to Pope Benedict XVI’s 2009 Message for the Celebration of the World Day of Peace. Professor Cadorette spends the majority of the chapter explaining liberation theology, his strength in the field. He derides free market capitalism as the root cause of “deranged materialism” and notes the importance of grace and subsidiarity in the grassroots changes in ecclesiology that are taking place in the post-Vatican II era (pp. 231-241). One subsection covers Pope John Paul II’s critique of capitalism and communism and support for worker’s rights. Another describes Benedict XVI’s intellectual conservatism, Johannine Christology, and emphasis on global solidarity. Cadorette also takes the opportunity to defend his fellow liberation theologians from the pope’s accusations that

they employ a reductionist Christology that politicizes Jesus. He concludes the chapter and text with a plea for communal action “on behalf of the Reign of God” (p. 262).

Despite its wide scope, *Catholicism in Social and Historical Contexts* has some weaknesses. Foremost among them is its promotion as a textbook for undergraduates. There is no instructional support here: no electronic companion, no suggestions for further reading (other than a few in the body of the text), no discussion questions, no maps, no charts, no appendices, no photos, no boldface terms, keywords, or glossary. This criticism is better directed at Orbis Books than Professor Cadorette, however. A brief glance at their catalog reveals a number of works that have study guides, discussion questions, and glossaries. Why not this one?

I do not envy the scholar whose goal is brevity and whose subject matter spans over 2,000 years. Cadorette does a tremendous job here of making profoundly difficult decisions about what to include and what not. I would have liked one additional chapter in between Augustine and Aquinas, however, and coverage of the schism between the Eastern and Western churches and Western Christian incursions into the “Holy Land.” The cross-cultural and religious contact between Christians and Muslims in particular is an absolutely essential subject for today’s students, who must understand the intertwined pasts of religions whose contemporary conflicts steal every headline. Without a knowledge of this history, students cannot wrestle deeply and critically with the social, political, and religious tension to which they are so frequently exposed.

There are other significant omissions that weaken the text. Women are barely visible. Cadorette notes their inferior status in Catholic history but with the exception of Clare of Assisi, no woman’s experience is a part of his narrative, and even in her case, influence on the develop-

ment of Christianity is attributed to Francis. The geographical scope is likewise limited. Save for a few pages on the United States, Canada, and the growth of Catholicism in the Southern Hemisphere in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, this text is centered on western Europe. To his credit, Cadorette decries the Eurocentrism of the Vatican at various points in the text, but the lack of global focus, like the dearth of women, serves to reinforce the idea that Catholic Church is and has always been white, male, and European. Finally, the sexual abuse crisis—a tragedy of inestimable proportions—receives only one sentence here.

Some of Cadorette's assertions at the end of *Catholicism* reflect his desires for the church and his roots in liberation theology more than they reveal contemporary realities. He claims, "Freed from the vestiges of Christendom, the women and men who make up the Catholic Church can now speak truth to power as never before despite the timidity and excessive caution of some of their leaders" (p. 262). And yet, as I write this, Father Roy Bourgeois's expulsion from the Maryknoll order for supporting women's ordination is imminent, a stance he was excommunicated for in 2008. In addition, Cadorette claims that after Vatican II "the question of social justice for Catholics is once again central to their identity, especially in a global economic system in which disparity is so rank and violence so pervasive" (p. 222). Though many Catholics are at the fore of social justice movements, the reverse—that social justice is paramount to many individual Catholics—is not necessarily so. Witness the vast number of American Catholics who have migrated to the Republican Party in recent years, at the same time that it has systematically and legislatively pilloried public assistance for the poor, non-whites, women, the elderly, etc., and promoted U.S. military force (and even torture) and imperialism. Witness also the millions of "cultural" Catholics, who do not practice the faith, do not know the social justice

tradition, and who disagree (often vociferously) with many church teachings.

These weaknesses are in sharp relief because Cadorette's historical perspective is one of the text's greatest strengths, especially in regard to the formation of Christianity. He avoids triumphalist interpretations of Christianity's spread. He does not speculate about Constantine's conversion or motivations for calling the Council of Nicaea. He reminds readers that there was no such thing as "Catholicism" in the second and third centuries but rather there were "competing definitions of Christianity and models of the Christian community" (p. 40). Later in the chapter, he reiterates that "what would come to be called Christendom is a very complex concept and did not happen in the fourth century" (p. 55). In the chapter on reform movements of the sixteenth century, he follows Diarmaid MacCulloch in claiming the changes of the time were the "by-product of many antecedent 'reformations'" (p. 121). And although he uses the term "Counter-Reformation," he acknowledges that most scholars (a camp in which I include myself) find "Catholic Reformation" to be a more elegant and accurate term.

Another major strength of the text is Cadorette's deft handling of complicated and nuanced ideas. He assumes no prior knowledge on the part of the reader, and although one student told me he needed to use a dictionary while reading it (!), the text never veers into highly specialized language. It is brief, but not so brief that it suffers from the truncation of other short histories and handbooks, which have value in their own right, but are entirely too subject to their authors' determination of importance and narrative framing. Cadorette's history displays very little of this, and where it is evident, the reader has been forewarned about his motivations.

Some chapters in particular blend history and historiography seamlessly. Chapter 5, "Reforms and Revitalizations," for example, presents the in-

credibly complicated upheavals of the sixteenth century in a straightforward manner. A number of my students have pointed to its usefulness for their understanding of the origins of different Christian denominations.

Cadorette's zeal for and knowledge of Catholic social teaching and justice issues shine throughout this text. As the church's emphasis on such issues increases--especially in the twentieth century--so too does Cadorette make them more explicit. From the chapters on the Second Vatican Council to the end, the text is clearly the work of a liberation theologian and harsh critic of global capitalism and neoliberal economic policies.

In all, there is much to recommend in *Catholicism in Social and Historical Contexts*. Although professors will need to provide supplemental materials, its merits outweigh this deficiency. I sincerely appeal to Orbis Books, however, to redesign the text as the instructional work it claims to be.

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