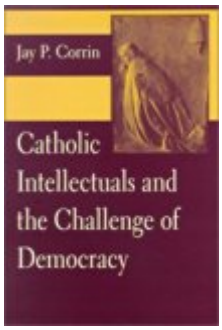
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Jay P. Corrin.** *Catholic Intellectuals and the Challenge of Democracy.* Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002. x + 584 pp. $55.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-268-02271-6.




**Reviewed by** Kevin M. Schultz

**Published on** H-Catholic (February, 2004)

Democracy, Catholic-Style

Catholics have a lot of explaining to do. Or at least it sure seems they do from the perspective of the intellectual history of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Why, one wonders, did so many American and British Catholics become political reactionaries during so much of this era? And why were so many of them apologetic to fascist-type regimes and so vituperative toward any whiff of socialism? And why, in spite of *Rerum Novarum* and *Quadragesimo Anno*, did the Church show such leniency toward the sins of the Right while neglecting much of the plight of the Left? And how can one explain a link of reactionaries that stretches from Karl Lueger to Hilaire Belloc to Charles Coughlin to the junior Senator from Wisconsin? Is there something, perhaps, in the (holy) water?

Answers to these questions have been complex, varying from the genetic (Catholics were intuitively uncomfortable with democracy, more at home with clear hierarchies of authority) to the defensive (most reactionary Catholics were converts from Protestantism anyway) to the slightly more plausible (a common suspicion of popular political participation followed the French Revolution and intermingled badly with a fundamental Catholic bias for authoritarian leadership). Regardless of these potential explanations, because Fascism has come to embody evil for most of us living in the early parts of the twenty-first century, it sure seems that Catholics have a lot of explaining to do. In the depths of totalitarianism, why did they succumb? Where was their countervailing tradition of social justice?

Jay P. Corrin's fine new book, ***Catholic Intellectuals and the Challenge of Democracy***, sets out to answer some of these questions, and his findings are important. His method is to look at the writings of a series of Catholic intellectuals from the early-nineteenth century to the late 1930s in order to determine what they thought of democracy as a political practice. Because democracy was the western world's favored "third way" between Fascism and Communism, Corrin's premise is that if we can understand how Catholic intellectuals reacted to democracy, we should be able to see more clearly some of the pushes and pulls that

denied democracy's ability to serve as a genuine political alternative for many of Catholicism's brightest thinkers, many of whom eventually swerved to the very far Right.

Broadly speaking, Corrin finds that the politics of democracy sent Catholic thinkers in two very different directions: either they trusted the capacity of people to rule themselves and distrusted the alternatives presented by Fascism and Communism because each of these by definition extinguished freedom for the individual, or Catholic thinkers decided that democracy was simply the first step on a slippery slope toward Communism, which was so evil (it wanted to kill the Church!) that its presence alone justified the stiff hand of an authoritarian ruler. The two widely divergent approaches to the problem of democracy "would divide Catholic intellectuals well into the first half of the twentieth century" (p. 40).

Much of Corrin's book (perhaps a bit too much) is devoted to understanding the various forms of conservatism that made democracy a challenge to be overcome, rather than a plausible form of politics for the City of Man. Exploring the work of nineteenth-century thinkers like Karl von Vogelsang and Frederic Le Play, Corrin locates as the central conservative motif a feeling that democracy could never work effectively because the power of capitalism made the masses too reactionary, ultimately leading the masses to champion some variant of Communism, which of course was no friend of the Church. A powerful monarch was the only plausible limit to capitalism's power (and therefore Catholicism's survival). And once this conservative tradition intermingled with nineteenth-century romanticism, it becomes slightly easier to understand why Fascism might have been intellectually appealing: Fascism, as a necessary evil to save Catholicism from Communism, could be romanticized as the revival of a unified moment of lost medieval grandeur. Corrin clarifies this point in a chapter titled "The Appeal of Fascism," which he concludes by asserting "dictatorship was an acceptable means for the greater purpose of preserving Catholic culture" (p. 212).

The only reason to believe there is too much in Corrin's book on the various strands of Catholic conservatism, however, is because the other half, the Catholic encounter with democracy, is so illuminating. Indeed, Corrin's most important contribution will almost certainly be to have located a solid line of liberal Catholic thought that has been mostly ignored by those of us inclined to follow the chain from, say, Belloc to Senator McCarthy. In this pursuit, Corrin shows what he sympathetically calls "the other face of Catholicism," a group of Catholics who could "identify with and celebrate the progressive, democratic legacy of their faith" (p. 395). His central point is that "the Catholic tradition has been flexible enough to adjust to the architecture of modern secular culture and, at the same time, offer new and imaginative solutions to the problems that have grown out of it." Thus, he explains away the seemingly overwhelming Catholic attraction to Fascism with: "it was not Catholicism that failed; rather, individual Catholics failed their historical heritage" (p. 395).

Corrin is at his best when he describes the heritage of this liberal Catholicism. He locates its beginnings in the writings of mostly lay Catholics responding to the dual revolutions of capitalism and democracy, men such as Frederic Ozanam, whose critique of capitalism was influential well before Karl Marx rose to prominence, and Bishop Wilhelm Emmanuel von Ketteler, who sought to articulate a "true communism" to counteract the more famous work of Marx and Engels. Corrin then shows how their ideas influenced a line of thinkers, including the prominent G. K. Chesterton, who ultimately moved in a more liberal direction than his romanticist friend Hilaire Belloc. (Indeed, one of Corrin's underlying concerns is to salvage Chesterton from those who would dismiss him as a Fascist sympathizer.) Then Corrin tells the sometimes inspiring stories of Catholic leaders

who used this liberal line to resist the rise of Fascism, stories of men such as Father Don Luigi Sturzo whose harsh criticisms of Mussolini led Il Duce to harass him into permanent exile, and Father Hans A. Reinhold, who faced persecution in Germany, resisted leaving his flock, and, once settled in the United States, began a series of social outreach programs, such as one between Catholics and Jews, one for Christian refugees from Germany, and one to jumpstart the American liturgical movement. (Thus, it was not just Jewish emigres who influenced American intellectual life in the middle of the twentieth century.) Corrin then connects this heritage to the "New Social Catholicism" of Father John A. Ryan, Dorothy Day, Peter Maurin, Jacques Maritain, and Virgil Michel, each of whom, Corrin suggests, shared a similar ideological premise. The book concludes with a respectable overview of the Spanish Civil War, and a revealing telling of the *Commonweal*'s_ heroic call for Catholic neutrality in the battle between Communism and Fascism. Corrin's central argument here is that unifying all of these thinkers was a deep concern, often based in Thomism, to preserve the sanctity of the individual over the state or the will of the masses. Defined this way, it becomes easier to see a relatively systematic line of liberal Catholic thought that dates from the advent of the late modern period to John Courtney Murray.

His findings here are interesting in several respects. For one, they reveal a fundamental unity between the extreme left and the extreme right: Corrin points out that thinkers on both sides of the debate began with a basic distrust of modern industrialism because of its alienation of labor. It was how they reacted to this point that sent them in the divergent directions.

Second, Corrin also makes it painfully obvious that the liberal line was overshadowed by its ideological adversary. One important question that Corrin never resolves is: why? In his attempt to explain the appeal of the Right, Corrin often makes some of its leading thinkers appear fanatical. Why, then, were they so popular? Another important question along these lines is: where was the Catholic leadership in this debate?

Finding few flaws in the actions of the various Popes, Corrin's story can in some ways be read as the betrayal of the middle rungs of the Catholic hierarchy. Although the various Popes vacillated in clarifying an official position on democracy (only in 1963 with ***Pacem in Terris*** did the Church finally admit to the plausibility of political democracy), Corrin argues that other encyclicals had established a clear liberal social vision. Meanwhile, those lower on the Catholic hierarchy were occasionally serving to placate the likes of Hitler, as in the pointed case of a 1933 Concordat between Hitler and the Holy See, which had "fatal" flaws that were downplayed by German bishops eager for security.

One is left wondering why there was this resistance to a Catholic accommodation with democracy if the top of hierarchy was for it. Nevertheless, Corrin is to be congratulated for looking at the story from a broad, international perspective (the book is a model for the internationalization of history), and for provoking further important questions (a component of all good books). The thorniest of the bunch is why liberal Catholics had such a hard time winning converts to their position. But now, thanks to Corrin, we know this tradition existed, and it is a worthy task for the rest of us to try to figure out why it took so long to catch on.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-catholic

**Citation:** Kevin M. Schultz. Review of Corrin, Jay P. *Catholic Intellectuals and the Challenge of Democracy.* H-Catholic, H-Net Reviews. February, 2004.

**URL:** https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=8894