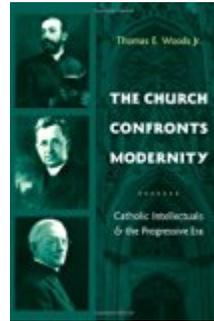


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Thomas E. Woods, Jr. *The Church Confronts Modernity: Catholic Intellectuals and the Progressive Era*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2004. x + 228 pp. \$22.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-231-13186-5.

Reviewed by Scott Langston (Department of Religion, Texas Christian University and Department of History, Tarrant County College)
Published on H-SHGAPE (January, 2008)



Seeing beyond the Surface: The Catholic Response to Progressivism

Thomas E. Woods Jr. has taken up a topic that heretofore has received little scholarly attention in spite of its presence during the well-chronicled era of Progressivism. Tracing the American Catholic intellectual response to Progressive ideas and actions, Woods focuses on five areas. After an introduction describing the impact of modernity, especially on Progressive thinking and efforts to establish a social democracy and civic religion free of sectarian dogma, Woods devotes chapters to pragmatism, sociology, education, economics, and syncretism. He compares Catholic thinking on these issues with their Progressive counterparts before concluding with an epilogue that traces the heritage of Catholic intellectual activity emerging from the Progressive period up to Vatican II.

In his chapter on philosophy, Woods focuses on the Catholic response to William James's pragmatism. Catholic thinkers objected to pragmatism more than any other intellectual trend because it emphasized the experiential nature of truth over absolute truth. For Catholics, the Protestant Reformation had led ultimately to James's philosophy, which they considered to be a radical subjectivism that replaced rational evidence and religious dogma with personal experience; each individual, in essence, became the arbiter of truth. This emphasis on individuality proved hostile to a universal, creedal faith. Catholic intellectuals, therefore, rejected Progressive philosophers' claims to be more democratic, preferring instead to see them as narcissistic, while they them-

selves endorsed the neo-Scholasticism initiated by Pope Leo XIII in 1878. Thus, Catholics could not support the seemingly worthy efforts of James to justify religious belief—albeit a belief unable to produce conclusive proof—to skeptical intellectuals. Catholic intellectuals, in contrast, attempted to show the rational, and therefore exclusive, basis for Catholic dogma.

As with pragmatism, Catholic thinkers considered Progressive sociology to be at its root hostile to Catholicism. While some Progressive sociologists believed that religion could make positive contributions, they also thought it needed to be radically restructured; it needed to be oriented away from the ritualistic and dogmatic and more intensely focused on bettering society as its chief end. Although some Catholics, such as William J. Kerby, agreed that sociology had great potential, it nonetheless needed to be based on natural law and divine revelation instead of observation and induction. Beyond these debates over sociology's theoretical aspects, most Catholics focused on its application, emphasizing the need for training in professional social services from a Catholic point of view. Their argument, however, was not only with secular Progressives. They also differed with both Social Gospel proponents, who understood human nature as essentially good, and conservative Protestants, who emphasized the depravity of humanity and eschewed social work in favor of saving souls. Believing humans to be fundamentally sinful and in need of redemption, Catholics engaged in social work not sim-

ply for society's sake, but first and foremost for the spiritual transformation of individuals. Thus, they attempted to infuse useful elements of "scientific charity" with Catholic principles, all in order to sanctify souls (p. 78). They criticized scientific charity because its actions were primarily motivated by hopes for a better society rather than love of God. They also objected that, once liberated from Christianity's natural law tradition, Progressive sociology often advocated remedies that Catholics found abhorrent, such as the use of contraceptives.

With regard to education, Woods describes the Catholic response as "the classic example of Catholic engagement with the Progressive milieu: selective appropriation of morally neutral elements of the Progressive program, for a purpose that tended to undermine that program's goals" (p. 86). Once again, such Progressives as John Dewey expressed disdain for dogma and its claim to immutable truth. Instead, they sought to form citizens who could function well in a democracy, that is, individuals who could think for themselves. This meant that moral systems were not absolute. Catholics, though, feared that as Progressives departed from traditional educational subjects—emphasizing socialization, practicality, and vocational training, rather than the classics—humanity would degrade. Furthermore, they emphasized the central place of religion in educational curricula, believing it to be essential for developing enlightened individuals. They did not, however, reject Progressive pedagogy in its entirety. Admitting that some Progressive pedagogical methods were beneficial, such Catholic educational theorists as Thomas Edward Shields used them, but primarily to develop good Catholics, a purpose decidedly at odds with Progressive goals.

The Catholic insistence on natural law coupled with Progressives' rejection of dogmatic systems once again led to disagreement over how to deal with such social issues as poverty and labor problems. The philosophical differences between the two camps caused any apparent agreements to be superficial. Father John A. Ryan, perhaps the best-known Catholic "Progressive"—a term that Woods feels has been carelessly applied to Ryan—favored the rights of labor to earn a livable wage on the basis that God had created the world in order to sustain humans. All humans, therefore, had a right to share in the earth's bounty, which was acquired through labor. It followed that those who possessed the earth's goods must allow those who did not a reasonable chance to earn a livelihood. What is more, Ryan considered the intrinsic value of individuals as the ultimate justification for paying a livable wage; any other rationale was inferior. Similarly,

the church based its argument for paying a family wage on its belief that the family, rather than the individual, was the basic building block of society. Yet, although Catholic intellectuals did not embrace the laissez-faire of many capitalists, neither did they endorse socialists' condemnation of private property or the wage system. In fact, Catholics acknowledged that the same capitalistic system that created oppression among workers also allowed others to sustain themselves. These problems, however, were not new according to Catholics, having their ultimate genesis in the Reformation, when the foundations of economic liberalism were introduced. As the various intermediary bodies standing between the individual and the state (such as medieval guilds) were gradually stripped away, the laborer was left without protection. Unions, according to Catholic thinkers, helped restore some of this protection.

In the book's final chapter, Woods takes up what he considers to be the primary objection of American Catholics to the Progressive agenda: the rejection of an absolute authority residing outside of humans as the standard of behavior in favor of an authority based in the individual and subject to change. Progressives wanted to establish a nonsectarian creed or a shared ethical code that transcended various sects and unified the nation. In this effort, they looked disdainfully on claims of universally applicable absolute truth. Catholics, in contrast, argued that morality required an authority beyond human reasoning; this authority was God. They criticized Progressive attempts as ultimately failing because they did not rest on a stable foundation. Hence, the only proper motivation for right conduct was love of God, something in which the Catholic Church offered guidance. Woods aptly sums up the Catholic position: "Thus in a society and an age tending more and more toward secular creeds, man-centered morality, toleration, pluralism, and emancipation from the dogmas of the past, Catholics clung to their Church's traditional exclusivity, insisting with one voice that the *only* satisfactory answer to moral chaos was that provided by the Catholic Church. It was the ultimate case of Catholic resistance to the Progressive *Zeitgeist*" (p. 156).

Catholic resistance may have appeared futile, but as pointed out in the epilogue, World War I "chastened" Progressives, while the Catholic response fueled the resurgence of American Catholicism leading up to Vatican II (p. 157). For Woods, therefore, the story of Progressive-era Catholics is ultimately one of triumph made possible by a strong conviction that the church held the answers to society's problems. He explains this confident resis-

tance as a reflection of the tone set by Vatican leadership, which probably would not have been possible after Vatican II when a more conciliatory church emerged. The church responded to the “anxieties ushered in by Darwinism” (p. 171) by reasserting a purposeful and ordered universe, an idea that could be traced to the ancient Hebrews and the Old Testament of the Christian Bible. The latter, in contrast to “Near and Far East” civilizations (p. 171), insisted that the world was divinely ordered, meaningful, and intelligible, and that history was linear rather than a series of purposeless and meaningless cycles. This ancient faith was based on “a series of discrete, unique, and unrepeatable historical events” (p. 171). At this point, Woods oversimplifies ancient Hebrew belief and experience as expressed in the Old Testament. While Progressive-era Catholics, as well as many Protestants and Jews, understood the Old Testament to depict a divinely ordered and meaningful universe, the picture was much messier. By the Progressive era, and even more so subsequently, biblical scholars using the historical-critical method were demonstrating the plurality of views residing in the Old Testament. Hebrew wisdom literature, for instance, especially the books of Job and Ecclesiastes, questioned the orderliness and meaningfulness of the universe, albeit within the framework of ancient Israelite belief. Furthermore, archaeological findings, then and now, have raised serious questions about the historical nature of many biblical accounts, while also demonstrating that the surrounding cultures at times attributed certain events to the activities of their gods. It has, therefore, become increasingly difficult to maintain the uniqueness of biblical events. Perhaps some attention to the impact of biblical scholarship on Catholics’ understanding and use of the Bible to critique Progressivism would be worthwhile. Finally, while other civilizations, especially in the “Far East” have viewed time cyclically, this does not mean that it is considered to be without purpose and meaning. In fact, actions played out in history

have tremendous implications within these worldviews.

There are a few areas where some expansion would be interesting. Woods’s characterization of Progressive-era Catholics as “one of the only groups in the United States who offered a serious, systematic response to the intellectual innovations of the Progressive Era” (pp. 175-176) may be true, but how did the Catholic response differ from these other groups, especially Protestant fundamentalists? On occasion, he does briefly address some of the differences, but a bit more detail would enhance the picture. Also, one wonders how the Roman Catholic response may have been influenced by the influx of immigrants, many of whom were Roman Catholic, and the attendant issues. Did a larger Roman Catholic population embolden the American church’s intellectuals, or was its effect negligible on their response to modernity?

The book’s strongpoint is Woods’s emphasis on how the underlying philosophy of Catholic intellectuals informed and shaped their actions and opinions. Too often, actions are emphasized to the neglect of the ideas and mindsets that drive them. Woods has done a fine job exploring and explaining this underlying layer so important to understanding historical events. In doing so, he corrects misconceptions, such as the impression that Catholics at times embraced the Progressive agenda. While there may have been similarities in methods or intermediate outcomes, Woods demonstrates that Catholics were involved in a program whose ultimate goals were quite at odds with those of Progressives. In accomplishing this task, he also skillfully explains the underlying ideas of Progressives and their impact on their actions. This book, therefore, makes an important contribution by furthering our understanding of Roman Catholicism in relation to Progressivism (and vice versa) and also by demonstrating the need for historians to pay close attention to philosophies that either consciously or subconsciously influence people and movements.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-shgape>

Citation: Scott Langston. Review of Woods, Thomas E., Jr., *The Church Confronts Modernity: Catholic Intellectuals and the Progressive Era*. H-SHGAPE, H-Net Reviews. January, 2008.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=14034>

Copyright © 2008 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication,

originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.