***Catholic Social Activism: Progressive Movements in the United States*. By Sharon Erickson Nepstad. New York: New York University Press, 2019. xi + 207 pp. $89.00 cloth, $30.00 paper.**

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The strength and the weakness of *Catholic Social Activism* is disclosed by its subtitle—*Progressive Movements in the United States*. Sharon Erickson Neptstad is a distinguished professor of sociology at the University of New Mexico, and she has written several well-received books offering sociological analyses of Catholic religious movements. Professor Nepstad is frank to acknowledge that she is "not even Catholic personally"(*ix*), even as the depth of her awareness and familiarity with Catholic social movements testifies to the long years she has spent researching them. The Preface announces the intention of *Catholic Social Action*, to move beyond official teachings to "how laypeople put these teachings into action" and capture "what happens on the ground, in the parishes and religious communities"(*ix*). Professor Nepstad brings a lens of great learning and deep reflection to *Progressive Movements in the United States*. Yet the framing of her study as a study of "lived religion"(10), asking "How have American laypeople responded"(11), and emphasizing the "independent agency" of laypeople limits somewhat the effective range of the analysis. It is no fault of Nepstad or her work that her study is sociological. Rather, it is that the complexity of what Catholicism is defies the narrowness of a simply sociological analysis as much as it cannot be understood fully in the abstract, theological frame that Nepstad's book seeks to escape.

This is a complex point that only can have brief explanation here. The Second Vatican Council emphasized the baptismal vocation (*Gaudium et Spes*, 43) of every believer, recognizing the centrality of each believer's lived faith experience in a way that opens the door to Nepstad's analysis of lived religion. *Catholic Social Activism* is not out of bounds in this very important sense. However, the merely sociological frame omits the dialogical (really, relational) reality of what lived experience inside the Catholic Church is. The limits become clear in places like Nepstad's chapter on "Earth Ethics and American Catholic Environmentalism," where she contrasts the environmental activism of lay Catholics with a 1991 U.S.

bishops' statement on environmentalism she describes as being "rooted in traditional Catholic beliefs"(157). The church is neither laypeople, nor its leaders, nor professional theologians, nor traditional teaching. For the believer, the church is a divine reality captured imperfectly in the human terms of a relational dialogue among all four. A sociological analysis is helpful so far as it isolates and examines one. But it must be remembered that the isolation is, per se, distortive.

Because the frame is somewhat distortive, the book occasionally falls prey to the same ideological divisions that have emerged in the Catholic community with one side tending to emphasize lived religion and another side emphasizing the official church. There is nothing particularly wrong with a restrictive focus on *Progressive Movements* that highlights activists embracing "a new style of resistance and whose stories have often been overlooked in accounts of mainstream Catholicism"(*xi*). Good studies choose narrow focuses. But perhaps especially because of the polarization that has such a firm grip on the Catholic Church, Nepstad's book has a tendency to fall into familiar binaries that sometimes conceal more than they reveal. The "medieval past" to which the church has "clung"(4), for example, was not an undifferentiated phenomenon. *Rerum Novarum* (1891), the touchstone document of modern Catholic social teaching on which such progressive movements built their commitments to social justice and the subject of Nepstad's first chapter, cites repeatedly to St. Thomas Aquinas. The same is true in other teaching documents from which progressive movements draw support. The seeds of progressive commitments were sown in the tradition and, had it been otherwise, it would be difficult to call these movements "Catholic" today. Yet the medieval church—and the official church more generally—crop up frequently as foils in opposition to the progressive forces Nepstad documents.

For this reason, as well, a central figure like Pope John Paul II emerges largely as a monochromatically conservative figure whose antagonism to many progressive movements locates him as in opposition to them. Certainly, it is true that the long John Paul II papacy was a centralizing reassertion of Vatican authority that took measures to silence theological reflection and "stop the [lay] movements"(126). But such coloring of John Paul II omits his support for labor movements, his skepticism about capitalism, and his fulsome opposition to the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. The division of the church into *Progressive Movements* and a "conservative side"(12) imposes limits that blinker some of the analysis. For example, probing the absence of a Catholic environmental movement in the mid-20th century in chapter 6, Nepstad offers several persuasive explanations but omits an entirely obvious one: working-class Catholics were entangled

with capitalism by their own economic dependency on the industrial economy, and that dependency was abetted by the unions and labor activism Nepstad examined in chapter 1. Where two progressive priorities come into conflict, *Catholic Social Activism* seems unable to see the clashing priorities.

It seems important to say that this is not a bad book: it delivers what it promises, a sociological analysis of progressive Catholic movements during the last century. Its weakness is a reifying presumption that what a sociological analysis needs—an identifiable progressive caucus divisibly distinct from the whole church—contributes to an understanding of the Catholic Church over the period investigated. It does, but only to a point. And where Nepstad describes a "clear instance of Catholic laypeople not obediently following the lead of the Vatican" and coming out "on the side of the poor rather than on the side of the Vatican"(126), it is difficult not to imagine that a future sociologist may write almost exactly the same sentence praising some of the Catholics at war with Pope Francis today. Both would tell us something about what divides Catholics. Neither would much illuminate the intricate reality of how Catholics sort through the competing priorities they face in a challenging world that always is more complex than the binaries into which we divide it.

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Scholars of Islam and authoritarianism have been waiting for this book. There is much conventional wisdom about the role of Islamic religious