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Book Review:
Catholic Social Activism: Progressive Movements in the United States

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Catholic Social Activism: Progressive Movements in the United States. Sharon Erickson Nepstad. New York: New York University Press. 2019. Paper, 207 pp., \$30.00. ISBN 978-1-4798-7922-9.

Sharon Erickson Nepstad's most recent book, *Catholic Social Activism: Progressive Movements in the United States*, offers an engaging summary of the history and impact of several progressive Catholic movements in the U.S. over the last century. These movements, covered sequentially in the book's chapters, include: labor movements to secure workers' rights; peace movements to resist war; the women's movement to advance gender equality; liberation theology and solidarity movements to confront poverty and political repression; the Sanctuary and New Sanctuary Movements to aid refugees and promote immigrants' rights; and the Environmental Movement to preserve the environment and combat climate change. Throughout these chapters, Nepstad skillfully illuminates not only how Catholic Social Thought (i.e., the teachings of the Catholic Church with respect to social issues) inspired and motivated grassroots activism, but also how the activists themselves, by putting their religious convictions into action in their everyday lives, challenged Church leaders to reflect on the meaning and applications of its teachings in response to the social injustices of the times. In doing so, Nepstad illustrates how Catholic Social Teachings are produced through what scholars refer to as the "hermeneutical circle" or the "circle of praxis," which entails gathering and analyzing data about the injustices (a sociological endeavor), determining a biblically appropriate response to the injustices (a theological endeavor), and then taking action. Given the richness of the details, insights, and synthesis found in this book, I highly recommend it not only for students and scholars of religion and social movements, but also for any readers interested in learning about the history of Catholic Social Thought and how faith-filled individuals and communities have sought to live out its tenants in their everyday lives.

The key strengths of this book, in my opinion, rest in Nepstad's selection of cases, her choice to devote a separate chapter to each, and her attention, as a sociologist, to how laypeople put the Church's social teachings into action in their daily lives – what sociologists call "lived religion" – through each of the movements she examines. Nepstad acknowledges in the preface that she cannot possibly cover all progressive Catholic social movements, and states that the cases she selected were chosen because they each entailed wide-scale grassroots organizing and took on "a distinctively Catholic character rather than merely being a part of a broader (and mostly secular) political coalition" (pp. ix-x). This is a wise choice because, as is evident in each of the chapters, the activists she studies are genuinely motivated by their religious convictions; they are not simply using religion to advance various political agendas. Moreover, for three of the six movements she covers, she is able to draw on interview data she gathered for previous research projects. By devoting a chapter to each movement, Nepstad is able to present the historical context and chief themes of Catholic Social Teaching with respect to the social issue in question, and then describe how lay Catholics and grassroots activists sought to embody, amplify, and expand those teachings through direct action and resistance. In doing so, Nepstad is able to highlight specific instances in which activists pushed the Church to take stronger stances, adopt more direct forms of action, and press for policy changes that would address the root causes of various social problems.

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Students and scholars of religion and social movements will appreciate how Nepstad, in the retelling of activists' stories and the synthesizing of the each movement's dynamics and impact, is able to draw attention to the ways in which Catholic grassroots activism has what she calls a "trickle up" effect – i.e., how the activists' embodiment and amplification of the chief tenets of Catholic Social Teaching caught the attention of Church leaders and pressed them to articulate a biblically-grounded responses in solidarity with the poor and marginalized. To illustrate this, Nepstad shows how Catholic Church leaders, during different periods over the last century-and-a-half, were challenged to: support workers' rights to form unions and receive just wages; to prioritize diplomacy and negotiation over use of "just war" in situations of international conflict; to condemn the abuses of capitalism and advance a "preferential option for the poor;" to support the rights of the persecuted to emigrate and receive safe haven; and, most recently, to prioritize concern for the environment over anthropocentric worldviews that suggest that humans "have dominion over the earth." The "trickle up" influence of grassroots Catholicism was also evident, according to Nepstad, in the increasing willingness of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops to invite consultants, experts, and laypeople to listening sessions before composing official pastoral statements, such as their 1983 pastoral letter on war and peace titled *The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response*.

I found only a couple, very minor shortcomings with this book. In the chapter "Equality for Women and Catholic Feminism," for instance, Nepstad describes the emergence of Catholic feminism and Catholic feminist theology in the United States, their manifestation in the Women's Ordination Conference in the 1970s, and ultimately the formation of the Womenpriests the Women-Church movements, which provided visions of a renewed church and a renewed priesthood, respectively, through what Nepstad calls "prefigurative politics" – "living today as you want the future to be" (p. 88). Although Nepstad describes some of the obstacles that Catholic feminists encountered, including the Vatican's unwillingness to permit artificial birth control or to even discuss the possibility of female priests, I was hoping Nepstad would have detailed the failure of the U.S. Catholic bishops in 1992 to adopt a proposed pastoral letter on the role of women in the church and society, which they had worked on for nine years. This was yet another instance in which the bishops' efforts to listen to the experiences of laypeople did not trickle up.

I was hoping, too, that the Conclusion would have been slightly longer and highlighted and synthesized more examples from the preceding chapters of how the "hermeneutical circle" or "circle of praxis" was evident in each of the movements discussed earlier. Nepstad does such an excellent job in this concluding chapter describing how the Catholic peace movement stimulated the "circle of praxis" that I was hoping to see a similar description and synthesis with respect to the other movements.

Overall, this is an excellent and engaging book, and it will appeal to audiences of all stripes – academics, college students, church leaders, and general readers. In addition to its richness in historical, theological, and sociological detail, the book offers "a trip down memory lane" for those who, like myself, lived through some of this history and remember how our own lives, or the lives of our faith communities, were influenced by these movements. For those in this category, this book will bring together the details of those experiences, rekindle memories of how we lived them, and invite new and fresh perspectives.