

*Encyclopedia of Catholic Social Thought, Social Science, and Social Policy*

Michael L. Coulter, Stephen M. Krason, Richard S. Myers, and Joseph A. Varacalli, eds. *Encyclopedia of Catholic Social Thought, Social Science, and Social Policy*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2007. 2 vols: 1165 pp. \$150.00. Hardcover. ISBN: 9780810859067.

As a child growing up in the 1960s and 1970s in a Roman Catholic household, I knew one thing early on: while there was one collection of largely comprehensive positions that came out of the magisterium of the church, the presentation of those positions varied greatly depending on the person and his or her particular Catholic training. Jesuits did not see things the same way Dominicans did, nor did Benedictines see things the way the Silesians or Josephites did. Religious women sometimes saw things quite differently than diocesan priests. What the Catholic Church taught might have a clear central core, but the articulation of that core varied widely. It was hard to articulate accurately what was believed by all those who I knew were serious, practicing Catholics.

The information contained in the *Encyclopedia of Catholic Social Thought, Social Science, and Social Policy* has a similar problem. There is an attempt to provide clarity to a range of Catholic social thought and policy, but often the attempt results in oversimplification. Glancing through the entries, many of which are fine pieces of scholarly work, I find that some present doctrine, some represent common practice, but some represent idealized behavior more than normal practice. Some topics are presented in a balanced way; some topics are presented with a significant slant. What a reader finds in these volumes does not always accurately reflect the range of possible positions that are held on important areas of conflict in Catholic thought. The more a reader knows about Catholic social thought and practice, the more useful she will find this two-volume set. Treating any entry as one might an entry in Wikipedia, that great experiment in the social construction of reality, would be prudent. That said, this whole project is an engaging undertaking, which, while flawed, is a worthwhile beginning.

The editors claim that the *Encyclopedia* “represents an attempt at a comprehensive and broad-ranging analysis of how the Catholic religious, moral, and intellectual tradition can and should shape society and social life” (ix) while also acknowledging that this attempt is “setting the stage for future work in the field” (x). The volumes were “envisioned to appeal to the well-educated layperson, whether Catholic or not,” wanting a “clear and accurate introduction to Catholic social thought and a Catholic informed social science and social policy” (x). It is intended as an academic resource for both college/university and seminary education. The fact that all entries are signed makes it far more valuable as a scholarly resource. The succinct bibliographies that follow the entries and “see also” suggestions are useful.

However, what is set forth here is clearly more prescriptive than descriptive. I would caution that laypersons, especially those who are not Catholic, might find information here that seems to be definitive but in reality presents a distinctly orthodox and thus not fully representative position of what Catholic Church members profess and believe.

The editors appear to have a lot in common. Two are political science professors, two are lawyers (one a professor of law), and the fourth is a professor of sociology. Stephen Krason is a professor at the Franciscan University of

Steubenville and Richard Myers is a professor at the Ave Maria School of Law at Ann Arbor. Two of the editors are or have been officers in the Society of Catholic Social Scientists, a decidedly orthodox organization, which has its headquarters at the Steubenville school. While over 300 authors contributed over 800 entries (ix), contributors seem to have been selected because they were familiar to the editors, and not necessarily because they represent a broad range of Catholic thought. There is no article concerning, or contributor from anyone associated with, the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University or the Life Cycle Institute at the Catholic University of America, for example, but several contributors write frequently for the *Wanderer* (an independent Catholic newspaper known to be theologically and socially conservative) or are affiliated with the Ave Maria School of Law or the Franciscan University of Steubenville. This limited selection of perspectives constricts the value of the work.

A sampling of entries illustrates the unevenness of coverage:

The entry “Work, Catholic Understanding of” by William Toth is a particularly fine piece, noting that since work is a conscious act it is a uniquely human act. The author goes on to tie the theology of work into the liturgical act of worship: “The celebration of the Eucharist offers each Catholic the opportunity to place his or her work with its triumphs and failures on the paten and offer it to God” (1141).

Stephanie Block, a regular contributor to the *Wanderer*, writes the entry for “Ruether, Rosemary Radford.” The entry focuses almost exclusively on Ruether’s conflicts with the church, glancing over any positive influences she brought to Catholic theology and education.

Presenting the Epistle of 1 Peter as indeed written by the Apostle and first Pope, St. Peter, in the entry on the “Popes, Early,” by Robert Gorman may be a bit of a stretch for readers trained in socio-historical methods of biblical interpretation. On the other hand, his use of other early documents —fragments of letters from and to early popes—showing the social involvement and concerns of the early leadership of the church is colorful and engaging.

Margherita Marchione’s entry on “Pope Pius XII and the Jews” reads more like a personal defense of this WWII pope than a factual rendering of the events of the war. It is only in the second to last paragraph in the two-page article that we finally learn that this defense springs from the belief that “the one person ... who did more than anyone else to halt the dreadful crime and alleviate its consequences is today made the scapegoat for the failure of others” (856). However, no other explanation is given for why the pope was made a scapegoat. Coincidentally, the main page of the website of the Society of Catholic Social Sciences solicits the signing of a petition advocating for Pope Pius XII’s canonization.

The entry on “Separation of Church and State” by Oswald Sobrino makes the unsettling claim that “[in] place of this unreasoning hostility toward the general cultural reality of religion, Catholic Social thought emphasizes the cultural centrality of religion for the welfare of mankind” (952). The separation of church and state been frequently championed by Catholics in the United States (the recent case against prayer in school comes to mind).

The use of language is inconsistent: when did it become acceptable again to use “mankind” to refer to “people”? In several entries, as well as in the introduction and preface, “man,” “men,” and “mankind” are used frequently to mean “humans” and “humankind.” While some contributors are very careful in their use of inclusive language, the failure of the editors to adopt such a simple standard is regrettable.

While some entries present an oversimplified take on rather complex areas of potential conflict for some Catholics, other entries are written with wit and insight. The rather droll survey of the historical opposition of American Catholics to the right of women to vote is cleverly presented in the entry on “Women’s Suffrage Movement.” Here, John Quinn rightly notes that some of that opposition was a reaction to suffragist feminists “publicly [expressing] anti-Catholic, anti-immigrant views” (1138). He also hints that some of the opposition might have had to do with the issue being associated with the temperance movement, a highly unpopular concern for most immigrant groups. The article ends in a rather tongue-in-cheek fashion, noting that after the vote was ratified in August of 1920 “long standing Catholic opponents such as Gibbons and Cardinal William O’Connell of Boston immediately urged all Catholic women to exercise their new rights so as to defend the nation from the dangers threatening it” (1139)—presumably including women’s suffrage.

While the entry on “Condoms” by Lawrence Roberge might clarify the why and how of the Vatican position, the conclusion that “the failure of condoms to prevent completely the risk of HIV transmission (or other sexually transmitted diseases) leaves the Church rejecting this barrier technology as a means to prevent the infection of HIV” (228) flies in the face of standard medical practice. No one thinks that vaccines prevent 100% of childhood infections, but as a society we insist most of the time that the benefits outweigh the potential failures.

Overall, the attempt to create such a comprehensive work on Catholic social theory and practice was worthwhile. Unfortunately, however, the results are not as satisfying as the attempt. The set is worth buying if only because the only other similar reference work, *The New Dictionary of Catholic Social Thought* (Liturgical Press, 1994) was published so long ago. This new work would best be used with an informed guide, preferably a librarian who has a suitable background in the Catholic Church and her policies. It is to be hoped that this venture inspires others to attempt a revised version that is more reflective of the rich and wide range of Catholic social theory and practice.

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