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Fabio Bolzonar, *Catholicism and the Welfare State in Secular France: Continuities and Changes in the Catholic Mobilizations in the Social Policy Domain (1940-2017)*. Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2023. 224 pp. Notes, references, and index. $45.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN: 9462703884.

Review by James Chappel, Duke University.

Most studies of the welfare state pay scant attention to religion. And why should they? Welfare policy tends to be hammered out in the proverbial smoke-filled rooms, as trade unionists and businessmen and politicians haggle over complicated mechanisms of unemployment insurance and hospital regulation. Likewise, most studies of modern religion pay scant attention to welfare policy. This is equally explicable: scholars of religion have tended more towards the realm of the symbolic, asking how religion intersected with questions of race, memory, and citizenship. In this book, though, Fabio Bolzonar attempts to bring the two discussions together, showing how Catholicism did or did not impact the evolution of welfare policy in France. The results are always judicious, and often surprising.

Bolzonar is a careful scholar, working at the intersection of history, political science, and sociology. He is wary of making grand claims or sweeping theses. He does have one, though: essentially, that Catholicism has played a major role in French welfare policy, even and especially after the supposed secularization of French society in the later decades of the twentieth century. He takes an admirably wide approach to his study of the Church. Many scholars understand Catholicism to mean, essentially, the activity of priests and bishops in the religious sphere and the activity of explicitly Christian parties in the political sphere. Bolzonar pays his respects to both of those groups, as we'll see. But drawing on the sociologist José Casanova and others, he has a more capacious understanding of what Catholicism is and how it operates in the world.

The book begins with an introduction, usefully surveying the literature on Catholicism and the European welfare state. His interlocutors are primarily European historical sociologists such as Göran Therborn, his mentor, and Kees van Kersbergen, the author of one of the few previous studies on this theme. He spends little time with the more theoretical reflections on religion and the French state that have been *au courant* in the American academy (scholars such as Joan Scott and Mayanthi Fernando are not engaged with). This indicates a kind of empiricism that can sometimes be refreshing, but it has its downsides too (to which I'll return later).

After the introduction, the book is divided into two parts, mirroring Bolzonar's sense of how the activity of the Church evolved over time. Three chapters cover the period from 1940 to 1990, asking about the influence of Catholicism on welfare policies in France's multiple regimes. His dogged

empiricism is apparent from the start. In the chapter on Vichy France, he wades into the contested question of just how relevant Catholicism was to the Nazi-collaborationist regime. His answer is that, at least in the realm of welfare policy, it didn't matter much. To be sure, as other scholars have shown, the Pétain regime celebrated the nation's Catholic heritage, and there was a specific Catholic influence on its family policy. But family policy does not a government make: by looking at Vichy reforms in the hospital system and in labor relations, he's able to show that, when it came to actual policy design, outspoken Catholics were often taking a backseat to more secular technocrats and nationalists.

The second chapter in this section focuses on the Fourth Republic (1946-1958), and in practice really on the late 1940s. This of course was the heyday of France's Christian Democratic Party, the *Mouvement républicain populaire* (MRP). Here, too, Bolzonar urges caution. It is true that the MRP was, for a few crucial years, an electoral juggernaut and an important voice in questions around social insurance. This does not mean, though, that the MRP's reforms were in lockstep with Catholic demands or philosophy. As in the Vichy period, the MRP was most "Catholic" in its family policy (a phenomenon that I have tried to explain in my own book).[1] Other areas of concern for Catholic activists, namely housing policy and the empowerment of works councils, were low priorities for the party. While Bolzonar doesn't put it this way, one conclusion to draw from these chapters is that Catholicism was most powerful when its concerns amplified, rather than conflicted with, the imperatives of a natalist and nationalist political system.

The third chapter in this section focuses on the first thirty-five years of the Fifth Republic (1959-1995). In Bolzonar's telling, this was the nadir of Catholic influence on social policy. Charles de Gaulle didn't care much about Catholicism or about welfare policy, and from the Catholic perspective the central theme of the period was the decline and eventual (1967) disintegration of the MRP. Under Mitterand, things weren't much better. Culturally, mores were changing, and Mitterand oversaw dramatic policy changes in the arena of family policy in which Catholics had traditionally been most successful. Bolzonar shows that in the 1980s, the policy framework for families shifted away from the traditional natalism of the Catholic sort, and towards more modern policies that supported smaller families, single mothers, and opportunities for women to balance home and work life (for instance, through the utilization of state-sponsored childcare).

If the first half of the book has a thesis, it might be: Catholicism was not quite as influential on the postwar welfare state as you might have thought. And if the second has one, it might be: Catholicism was quite a bit more influential on social policy since the end of the Cold War than you might have thought. To make this argument, of course, Bolzonar has to expand his analysis of what Catholicism actually consists of (this, to me, was the most valuable and interesting part of the book). It is true, of course, that since the 1980s, Mass attendance has been down, and the recruitment of seminarians and nuns has cratered, too. Those statistics are not the only way to measure religiosity. By some other measures, Catholicism is actually doing quite well in France. For instance, the number of deacons has gone up enormously between 1990 and 2018, which has lessened the impact of the decline in priests. Catholic newspapers and magazines still circulate widely. And, perhaps most important of all given France's history with this issue, Catholic schools still have robust enrollments. In 2018 to 2019, there were more than seven thousand Catholic schools, enrolling more than two million students (about one-fifth of the total student population).

So, while Catholicism might be in decline in its old guise, it is finding a new one, centered more around voluntarism and civil society than it is around clericalism and church attendance. The last

two chapters of the book show how Catholicism has been able to impact French welfare policy in the age of austerity politics. The first of these chapters focuses on the all-important issue of housing, which had long been a concern for socially minded Catholics but was not a concern of the French state until late in the twentieth century. Bolzonar shows how Catholics have played a prominent role in the development of new housing policies. They didn't do so through Catholic parties, much less through papal pronouncements. That's no longer how politics works. They exercised their influence by forming nonprofits and foundations, which provided expertise to policymakers and drummed up moral support for housing policy reform.

The last chapter concerns the conflicts over gender and sexuality that have rocked France, and many other states, in the years since 2008. The chapter is mainly about the *Manif pour tous* and the nationwide mobilization against same-sex marriage. Bolzonar applies the same framework as in his chapter on housing policy to show how Catholics were exercising power primarily through voluntary organizations. In this case, they were not successful, as François Hollande felt that he had to confront the looming right-wing threat by codifying same-sex marriage into law. Nonetheless, the demonstrations recreated a familiar alliance between right-wing nationalists and Catholic conservatives. Here, too, the French hierarchy, absent for much of this book, played a role once again, urging Catholics to defend the sanctity of marriage and the family.

As this summary shows, *Catholicism and the Welfare State in Secular France* is a worthy addition to the literature on religion and social policy. From my perspective as an American-trained historian, though, I could not help but notice some important absences. For one thing, it was striking that the book paid so little attention to issues of race, decolonization, and migration. Not only have these issues been central to conservative mobilization in recent decades, they are certainly issues of social and welfare policy. The question of who deserves the largesse of the state is not broached here. Secondly, I found myself wanting more information about what we might call the flip-side of Catholicism and welfare policy: Catholicism and neoliberalism. Bolzonar shows us how Catholics responded to the rise of austerity, but little about the role they played in creating it. How have Catholic traditions of subsidiarity morphed, in the 1980s and 1990s, into defenses of the free market? We know that such things happened in Poland and the United States, but what about in France?

These concerns aside, this book is well worth reading by anyone interested in the development of French social policy and civil society. It is clearly written and pleasantly reluctant to shoehorn evidence into sweeping conclusions. The most innovative and important part of the book, to my mind, comes in the second half, where Bolzonar shows how Catholicism has reinvented itself for a new political order, in which expertise and nonprofit mobilization play a key role against a general backdrop of austerity politics--an atmosphere very different from the decades of the mid-century when the French social system was born.

NOTES

[1] James Chappel, *Catholic Modern: The Challenge of Totalitarianism and the Remaking of the Church* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2018).

James Chappel
Duke University

james.chappel@duke.edu

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