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American Catholic Lay Groups and Transatlantic Social Reform in the Progressive Era

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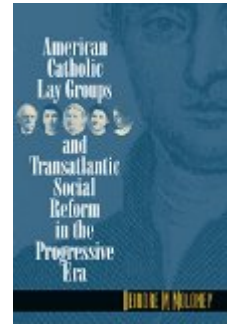
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Deirdre M. Moloney. *American Catholic Lay Groups and Transatlantic Social Reform in the Progressive Era*. Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2002. xiii + 267 pp. \$25.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-4986-6; \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2660-7.

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Lay Catholic Social Reform Groups Get Their Due

Lay Catholic Social Reform Groups Get Their Due

Speak of Progressive Era reform groups and most people will reflexively think of Protestant efforts like settlement houses, charitable aid societies, and temperance crusades. In the Progressive Era, though, Catholic laity also formed active voluntary organizations to work for temperance, rural colonization (resettlement of urban immigrants to rural areas), port programs (assistance for newly arrived immigrants), charitable aid, and urban neighborhood improvement (settlements). The considerable contribution of Catholics to social reform and charitable works has been neglected in much of the scholarly literature about Progressive Era reform groups. Even the literature on temperance advocacy mentions the sizable Catholic Total Abstinence movement only in fleeting references, if at all. Moreover, the few works that have discussed Catholic lay reform efforts have concentrated on single lay groups (Philip Gleason's *Conservative Reformers* and Christopher Kauffman's *Faith and Fraternalism*) or a single city (Paula Kane's *Separation and Subculture*). The 1997 study by Brown and McKeown, *The Poor Belong to Us*, examines Catholic social reform but focuses on that organized by the Church, not by the laity.

This scholarship void Deirdre M. Moloney has effectively filled in her study of Catholic lay reform movements of the Progressive Era. But Moloney's goal is not just that we "recognize the diverse origins of the American social reform" to include Catholics (p. 11).

She also points out the autonomy of many Catholic lay groups in the Progressive Era, the role played by both gender and ethnic nationalism in Catholic lay reform, and the Catholic response to Protestant reformers, which Moloney calls the "Catholic critique" (p. 10). The book provides us a fascinating glimpse into the charitable goals chosen by Catholic lay groups in the period before the consolidation of effort under the Church after World War II.

Her main thesis is that as Catholics began to move into the middle class toward the end of the nineteenth century, they desired respectability as Americans, rather than the second-class status of hyphenated Americans. Striving for acceptance, they pursued charitable and reform efforts. However, while they accepted upward mobility, they also struggled with both the materialism that social mobility had conferred and the anxiety created by the unavoidable dilution of their ethnic and religious heritage. These tensions distinguished Catholic lay reform movements from their Protestant counterparts.

Moloney begins with a chapter on the impetus given to lay reform work by the Catholic Congress at the Columbian Exposition of 1893, then moves to the neglected topic of Catholic temperance work. Unlike its Protestant counterparts, the Catholic Total Abstinence movement acted as a positive alternative, stressing moral suasion rather than mandates, and offering a less dogmatic alternative to the "temperance zealots" (p. 68).

Moloney next moves to Catholic efforts to ease the transition of the newly arrived, first through rural colonization programs, and later, by providing assistance for young women in urban areas. Moloney then turns to lay Catholic charitable works, positing the differences between Protestant and Catholic efforts as more than differing theology. She maintains that Catholic differences in charitable work stemmed from their outsider status where Protestants could rely on their inclusion in the dominant social class for validation. In her final chapter, she looks at the charitable work of the Catholic women's organizations. While Catholic women may have come to the social reform movement later than their Protestant peers, they came to embrace what Moloney calls "activist domesticity," the view that while women's foremost role was within their own homes, they would be wrong to let their energies stop at their own "four walls" (p. 180). Originally begun as charity organizations at the parish level in the 1890s, some Catholic women's groups grew into regional and national groups working on a variety of goals, such as entertainment standards, probation work, and Americanization programs. Developing controversies over the women and their goals reflect gender roles in flux within the laity of the Church. "Because women often symbolized Catholic upward mobility, their behavior reflected both an expanding sense of noblesse oblige among Catholics and a deep ambivalence about the implications of improved economic status among some American Catholics" (p. 204).

Moloney's contribution to the extant scholarship goes beyond the story of these neglected lay movements in the United States: she also reveals and analyzes their transatlantic ties. She shows that Catholic lay social organizations often turned to their European predecessors for guidance and methods. The Catholic Total Abstinence movement took its cues not from the WCTU or the Anti-Saloon League, but from the Irish temperance movement. The Society of St. Vincent de Paul, which eventually grew to five hundred parish-level groups, originated in France and most of its members lived outside the United States. The Catholic Women's Union modeled itself on a German

group. One of the first to seek immigrant aid for young women was not an American, but an Irish woman who lobbied for American port programs.

Moloney also contributes to the still small but growing body of scholarship on Catholic social work by extending the research beyond Boston and New York. Her study is national in scope and delves into rarely used resources in the midwest which add to our knowledge of ethnic and class patterns of social reform. This archival research authenticates her contention that motivation for social reform works could be found in the desire of the newly emerging Catholic middle class to prove itself to the Protestant majority. However, even while seeking acceptance through social charity and reform work, these lay groups used distinctly old-world methods, rejecting many of the techniques used by American Protestants.

While offering valuable information to fill a scholarly gap, the book might be difficult for non-Catholics without explanation of terms such as "women religious." And, since Moloney's motivation for writing the book is to bring to light the considerable contributions of Catholics to social causes in the Progressive Era, she might have included some background information on what she calls a significant inspiration for that work, the 1891 papal encyclical *Rerum Novarum*. She mentions it frequently and persuasively as a major influence on lay Catholic charity workers, but she gives little insight into exactly what *Rerum Novarum* said.

That quibble aside, Moloney has written a credible book that clearly transmits an overriding theme of tension. The adherents of the religion widely feared at the time for its non-democratic, communal philosophy sought by charitable works to prove themselves worthy Americans as they progressed toward the American middle class. They were torn between the conflicting goals of establishing their own Americanization by accomplishing good works for their less-fortunate coreligionists, yet remaining true to an international Church and their own ethnic heritages.

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