
Writing in the spirit of Alexis de Tocqueville, Michael Zoller, Director of the Center for American Studies and Chair of Political Sociology at Bayreuth University in Germany, provides, with both its inherent strengths and weaknesses, a distinctive “outsider’s perspective” on the American Catholic and religious experience. Readers will find Professor Zoller’s social history, covering the years from 1492 through 1993, extremely valuable for three reasons. First, he provides a vast amount of useful information and data derived from a judicious mix of qualitative and quantitative sources. Second, he generates many intriguing (and, of course, debatable) insights about the myriad events, processes, and individuals studied. For example, and contra the understanding of many traditionalists, he argues (correctly, I believe) that “the presumed religious orientation of the immigrants and their native countries . . . (around the turn of the twentieth century) . . . seems to be largely a retrospective illusion” (133). Rather, Professor Zoller contends, it was the impressive and effective institutional presence of a mid-twentieth century Catholic Church in America that effectively socialized the European immigrants and their children into the Catholic faith. In a second example, this time contra the progressive orientation, Professor Zoller questions (again, correctly, I believe) the religious authenticity of the politicizing of the Catholic Church during the 1970s and 1980s by a left-wing “new class of church mice” (200). In this regard, he does an excellent job of demonstrating the connection between the Bishops’ Bicentennial Program with its centerpiece, the Detroit “Call to Action” Conference (1976) and such statements as “The Challenge of Peace” (1983), and “Economic Justice for All” (1986). He claims, furthermore, that Catholicism has now self-corrected from its leftward veer and is back to charting a more centrist course. His volume is replete with hundreds of other such intellectually stimulating and controversial observations and claims.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Professor Zoller provides an important and comprehensive theoretical interpretation of the American Catholic experience that deserves a respectful hearing and much reflection and discussion. It is one that rejects both the Americanist progressivist and Romanist restorationist perspectives and is closest to, on the American scene, the reformist impulse of the Catholic neo-conservatives, Michael Novak, George Weigel, and Father Richard J. Neuhaus. It is one that sees the American Catholic Church, at its best, as an institution opposed to all “extreme” positions, able to navigate and constantly move toward “la via media,” and center itself squarely between loyalty to Rome and America.
Embedded as it is in a Protestant (and now increasingly secular) milieu, Professor Zoller starts off his analysis by claiming that while American Catholicism theoretically represents a “cultural improbability,” it has historically and basically, up to and including the present and all things considered, been successful in its religious and social mission. Professor Zoller accepts the idea that American society represents an exception to the positive link, more manifestly obvious in Europe, between modernity and secularization. As he states, “recently, even authors who earlier described America as a 'secular city’ have again begun to quote Tocqueville’s prediction that religion would not merely survive but flourish in America” (x). Key to Professor Zoller’s analysis is the claim that the increased individualism of American life is not antithetical to the Catholic faith. As the author asserts, “religion takes a detour through the consciences of individuals, and its influence increases in the degree that it ‘rules people’s hearts.’ Individualism has put an unmistakable mark on America's religious culture, and one may therefore ask whether it has actually weakened American political and religious institutions or — on the contrary — strengthened them” (x). Professor Zoller’s answer to his own question is ingenious. He argues that individualism has furthered both universalism and a greater attachment to the Catholic faith given the demonstrated ability and desire of individual Catholics to draw upon what he sees as the impressive cultural and institutional resources of the Catholic community. After stating that “the opposition between individualism and so-called communitarianism is not a real opposition at all” (245), Professor Zoller continues: “social and religious individualism furthers rather than hinders the development of comprehensive perspectives. Thus American Catholics have made their self-conception manifest in increasingly larger and more abstract entities. They have expended their loyalty beyond the extended family, first to the ethnic group and its religion, and then to the nation and their own denomination. At the same time, their concrete conduct of their lives outside their jobs has been oriented toward ever-smaller communities that they have chosen . . . [the Catholic] . . . advantage over other Americans and especially Europeans is that in taking the next step, they can rely on the concept of the church to bring together their abstract self-identification and the concrete communities in which they live” (245-6).

How, relatedly, does Professor Zoller handle the argument that contemporary American Catholics have assimilated excessively into an ever-more secular American society? As he himself asks, “how can a Catholicism so comfortably established in society still create enough distance to ensure its separate identity”(209)? His answer is that “this kind of distance . . . [is] . . . no longer produced by the marginal position of Catholics, but rather . . . by conscious fashioning of its own institutions” (209). Thus, because Professor
Zoller believes that Catholic institutions, structures, and organizations are presently shaping — in the main, at least — individualism into a correct appropriation of the faith, he can speak of an authentic Catholic American road to Rome (248) and the possible emergence, in the not-to-distant future, of what Father Richard J. Neuhaus means by a “Catholic moment” (243).

There is, interestingly, a strong affinity between the overall thesis of Washington and Rome and my published doctoral dissertation, Toward the Establishment of Liberal Catholicism in America (University Press of America, 1983), a book, by the way, that Professor Zoller, in his Annotated Bibliography, claims represents one of “three exceptional books that must be consulted to understand important aspects of the history of American Catholicism and the phases through which it has passed” (256). Suffice it to say that, as readers of my Bright Promise, Failed Community: Catholics and the American Public Order (Lexington, 2000) will confirm, I reject Professor Zoller’s overall thesis and my earlier and similar argument. In short, the Catholic infrastructural network called by myself and others a “Catholic plausibility structure” has been so battered in the post-Vatican II period as to make the claim that individualism is presently being shaped and channeled by the Catholic faith simply untrue for the large majority of American Catholics. To take just one example, Professor Zoller’s claim that the Catholic laity “are obedient when the Bishops take a clearly Catholic position — as in the case of abortion” (245) is simply not the case; just ask the majority of Catholics who voted for the pro-abortion Vice-President Albert Gore in the 2000 Presidential election! Under present-day conditions, i.e., sans an intact and orthodox Catholic plausibility structure, the present acceleration of individualism is simply a recipe for promoting secularism. Read Professor Zoller’s important and worthy volume and decide for yourself if “early” or “later” Varacalli is more on the mark.

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