Book Review


Sarah Shortall’s *Soldiers of God* examines the extraordinarily productive renewal of Catholic political and religious thought precipitated by the development of *nouvelle théologie* in twentieth-century France. In doing so, she makes two critical historical arguments. First, Shortall argues that rather than merely dismantling the institutional privileges and powers of the Catholic Church in France, secularisation enabled the Church to more openly address and respond to the modern age. Such developments had a ‘productive rather than a destructive effect on Catholic theology, inspiring new approaches to the problem of political theology and opening up new avenues for Catholic engagement in public life’ (p. 2). In this way, ‘the separation of Church and state in France inadvertently created the conditions for the revitalization of modern Catholicism’ (p. 2). Second, *Soldiers of God* argues that such renewals of Catholic social thought sit at odds with leading taxonomies of secular political theory, something that is often missed by religious scholars and intellectual historians who neglect the study and history of theology. Instead, Catholic intellectuals and priests turned towards distinctive texts and ideas within their own theological traditions in order to face modern questions; thus, ‘the “modernization” of Catholicism’ was ‘anchored in pre-modern categories and concepts’ (pp. 4–5). Specifically, Shortall seeks to demonstrate how such thinkers used theology and theological ideas to make political claims and offer critique of the secular state, engaging in what she calls a form of ‘counter-politics’ that resisted the atomism of liberalism, the domination of fascism, and the collective totalitarianism of twentieth-century communism. In this way, ressourcement theologians ‘used theology to fashion a vision that was both antifascist and antiliberal’ (p. 116). Such ‘counter-politics’—developed, for example, through theological debates on ecclesiology, papal authority, or...
temporal/spiritual realms—provided the grounds for renewing Catholic thought in post-war Europe, culminating in Vatican II.

Contained within these historical claims is a striking argument about the study of religion and the history of religious ideas more generally. By attending to the way ressourcement theology was used for subversive political ends, Shortall intervenes into wider debates regarding secularisation, political history, and religion. As Shortall herself notes, while renewed interest in the role of religion in public life amidst secularisation can be observed within the broad field of political theology, the material content of Christian theology and the work of professional theologians features far less often than other disciplines and figures. Soldiers of God, therefore, ‘attends instead to the productive relationship between theology and secularization’, aiming ‘to bring the “theology” back into the literature on political theology’ (p. 12).

Another important part of Shortall’s contribution lies in her impressive examination not merely of the material content and structure of religious ideas but the social conditions which give rise to such ideas. In her own words, Soldiers of God is not merely ‘about a set of ideas’ but also ‘about the relationships and institutions that make ideas possible’ (p. 325). The opening chapter, for example, seeks to show how various exiled Catholic seminaries created uniquely intimate environments for intellectual friendship and student circles which developed around Henri de Lubac, Gaston Fessard, or Yves de Montcheuil. Such ‘affective bonds’ lay the groundwork for both the reforms of nouvelle théologie and resistance to political oppression in the 1930s and 40s (p. 20). Chapter 5 examines leftist communities in post-war France and the development of the controversial worker-priests. As Dominican priests, for example, encountered proletariat communities, previously held suspicions were eased on both sides: ‘What began as grudging respect, cautious friendship, or a shared mutual aid project’, then, ‘soon blossomed into more formal modes of cooperation in the ranks of the trade unions or the peace movement’ (p. 164). Once again, personal bonds and the developments of relationships, this time between priests, factory workers, and communists, turned the tide of select streams of Catholic political engagement.

Soldiers of God sets a challenge for political theology, intellectual history, and the study of religion more generally. By examining the developments of nouvelle théologie as an ‘insider’ to the texts, worldviews, and beliefs of her historical subjects, Shortall demonstrates the importance of taking religious and theological belief seriously and on its own terms in order to make appropriate sense of historical, political, and cultural
shifts. ‘To understand religious ideas’, she writes, ‘we must attend not only to the particular place and time in which they are articulated, but also to the much longer textual traditions in which they are embedded’ (p. 11). *Soldiers of God*, therefore, may also be seen as an implicit call for those involved in the work of theology, such as myself, to engage within related disciplines and social sciences and to resist certain academic binaries between ‘religious’ and ‘theological’ research. To do so is neither to reduce theological claims to historical inquiry nor offer theology as a master-narrative to which history is derivative. Rather, such a task attends to the complex and often underappreciated ways religion, religious communities, and religious thought continue to profoundly shape the modern world.

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