CATHOLIC COSMOPOLITANISM
AND HUMAN RIGHTS

It is because Catholicism played such a formative role in the construction of Western legal culture that it is the focal point of this enquiry. The account of international law from its origin in the treaties of Westphalia, and located in the writing of the Grotian tradition, had lost contact with another cosmopolitan history of international law that re-emerged with the growth of the early twentieth-century human rights movement. The beginnings of the human rights movement, grounded in democratic sovereign power, returned to that moral vocabulary to promote the further growth of international order in the twentieth century. In recognising this technique of periodically returning to Western cosmopolitan legal culture, this book endeavours to provide a more complete account of the human rights project that factors in the contribution that cosmopolitan Catholicism made to a general theory of sovereignty, international law and human rights.

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CATHOLIC
COSMOPOLITANISM AND
HUMAN RIGHTS

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FOREWORD

Catholicism is not usually represented the way Leonard Taylor does in this fine book. In her own new *The Cosmopolitan Tradition* (2019), philosopher Martha Nussbaum entirely omits not merely Catholicism but even Christianity as a whole from the annals of cosmopolitanism, starting her account with the classical world and resuming it with Hugo Grotius in the Early Modern era, once political thought returned to its secular premises.

And yet, for all its difference in beliefs and practices, Christianity is no less formally universalistic than secular political theories ancient and current. It has also made room for the value of the individual person – often considered a hallmark of what it means to be a cosmopolitan today. International law is now frequently associated with a cosmopolitan perspective, yet histories of its trajectory rarely follow it into religious matters. Finally, and perhaps most important, it is increasingly clear that those interested in where contemporary human rights came from – central as they are to the cosmopolitan imaginary now – cannot afford to omit Christian origins and sources.

Of course, it remains quite contentious how Christianity in general and Catholicism in particular ought to be viewed as a kind of cosmopolitanism and what their precise relation is to contemporary beliefs and practices. Taylor’s book is an intrepid foray into these concerns, which students of Christianity and Roman Catholicism as well as international law and human rights will need to read, as much for its own argumentative originality as for its masterful synthesis of primary and secondary sources.

Far from denying deep roots to current discursive and practical ventures, notably in the long intersection and overlap of Catholic natural law traditions and what was long called the law of nations or peoples, Taylor provides a compelling examination of them. At the same time, however, he is not above acknowledging that the emergence of Protestantism and eventually secular modernity, especially in and around the French Revolution and its aftermath, put extreme stress on any potential for a
mutually productive relationship between Catholicism and the international law and human rights that were increasingly seen as too implicated in a standing threat to the Church.

As a result, Taylor shows, hard work was required in the twentieth century to make human rights safe for the Church – and vice versa. As he reminds us, the premodern critique of state sovereignty that Catholics in favour of the geographical and hierarchical dispersal of power had fashioned later came to serve their heirs well. This concerned them most when modern regimes treated sovereignty as an excuse for all manner of transgressions. The depth and detail of Taylor’s narrative across this book make it a rewarding exercise to follow with him the stages and steps through which this result was achieved, even if it was never uncontested. Indeed, it is actively challenged today by a new wave of self-styled ‘integralists’ sometimes allied with new populist strongmen.

Christianity is the largest worldwide religion, and Catholics remain the most numerous group within it. Both Christianity as a whole and Catholicism in particular have taken large strides in the past fifty years towards becoming global faiths like never before, with most of their adherents in the global south. And Christian non-governmental activism dwarfs secular engagement. In light of such facts, no cosmopolitan aspiration or project can afford to ignore Catholicism’s achievements and meaning in the path of moral universalism and its current guises of international law and human rights. Taylor succeeds as a sure guide through contested historical territory and prompts a necessary conversation in contemporary affairs.

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