
In this book Michele Dillon addresses the current challenges American Catholicism faces in an increasingly secularising society. She argues how 21st century American Catholicism constantly negotiates its position at the junction of official church teachings and contemporary secular realities. Dillon shows the various ways in which American Catholicism combines religious and secular aspirations. She states that “the postsecular recognition of the mutual relevance of the religious and the secular opens up new lines of dialogue, and thus of action, both within the Church and for its role in secular society” (p. 9). This work is based on both quantitative and qualitative data, which is a very strong asset. The quantitative data stem from a wide-ranging survey. For the qualitative data, the author draws upon three major sources. The first source consists of Pope Francis’ statements on topics such as climate change, social welfare, women’s and LGBT rights, and economic inequality. Second, she examines the Vatican 2015 Synod on the Family. Third, she investigates the US Bishops’ religious freedom campaign.

In the first chapter, Dillon sets out the main goal of this book, notably to demonstrate in which ways American Catholicism navigates between forces of tradition and forces of change. She introduces the main concepts she will deploy throughout the book, such as modernity, religion, secularism, and postsecularism, and sketches the theoretical background. Chapter two provides a more demographic approach of American Catholicism. Despite the clear trend towards secularisation, American Catholics maintain 21% of the total population. The author argues that this can be explained by the fact that interpretive autonomy is relatively embedded in American Catholicism, i.e. interpreting the Church tenets on a personal basis. She also indicates that American Catholics often compartmentalise their religious beliefs, in accord to their secular lived realities. This entails that many Catholics remain part of the Church, despite their disagreement with Church teachings, notably on relational and sexual moralities.

In chapter three, the author elaborates on the mission of Pope Francis to bolster a public and socially involved church in the world and to explicitly engage with secular social, political, and economic issues. Dillon argues that this commitment is embedded in the postsecular turn of the Church and amplified by an open and accessible communicative style. Starting from the essence of the Gospel, according to Pope Francis, he formulates a critique on issues as climate change, social justice, and economic inequality.
Chapter four pays attention to the topics of sex and gender. Dillon sketches the evolution within ecclesiastical ideas since Vatican II on abortion, female-male complementarity, and same-sex relationships. These topics are seen as highly controversial, as the Church is well-known for its restricting character, steeped in natural law thinking. However, since Francis’ papacy, abortion and same-sex relationships are met with a forgiving and non-judgemental approach. She states that Francis shifted focus to poverty, social justice, and the environment. For Dillon, these are signs of postsecular dialogue as it is an attempt of the Church to open itself to modernity.

In chapter five, Dillon elaborates on the religious freedom campaign from the U.S. bishops. She shows how the Affordable Care Act by president Obama fuelled religious activism of the bishops. In this Act it was decided that contraception would be covered by insurance, even in Catholic employer organisations, which they perceived as a violation of religious liberty. Together with their moral opposition against contraception, the bishops affirmed the ecclesiastical doctrines on same-sex relationships and sexual freedom, inspired by their natural law morality and against the policy of rather open tolerance of Pope Francis. Supported by the idea that religious freedom is a fundamental tenet of American society, they launched a campaign to advocate in favour of freedom of religion and conscience. Dillon argues that they are able to claim this religious liberty precisely because they operate in a liberal secular democracy which favours freedom of thought and confession. She underscores however that this campaign is almost solely targeted at sexual moralities, and that it does not include for instance economic or social justice.

In the sixth chapter, she discusses the Vatican Synod on the Family that took place in October 2015 and shows how this is a concrete example of a Church endeavour to reconcile doctrinal ideas and (post)secular expectations of individual Catholics. In this Synod, Francis attempted to grasp the existing diversity among Catholic individuals and families, and to embrace these lived realities. These realities encompass LGBT’s, divorced and remarried Catholics, single parents, and so on. Yet, despite these progressive leaps, Dillon remarks that women were excluded as voting participants. Additionally, even though this indicates a shift to a more pastoral approach without condemnation, there are no fundamental changes within the Church doctrine on these “irregular” situations. Michele Dillon captures this Synod as a symbolic example of postsecularism, as it pursues to openly negotiate the doctrinal teachings on marriage and families, and Catholic embodied lives.

The final chapter is dedicated to the reception of the text Amoris Laetitia (AL), which was written by Pope Francis after the Synod on the Family, in American Catholicism. The author approaches AL not only as an interplay between
traditional and progressive ideas in Roman Catholicism itself, but also as a site of encounters between Church teachings and the lived realities of individual Catholics, which can be both secular and devout. The most salient feature of *AL* is its secular vocabulary, in which Francis emphasises lived experiences. He declares that the Church at earlier times was too much preoccupied with 'doctrinal, bioethical and moral issues' (p. 158), instead of paying attention to the concrete situations in which individual Catholics live. Dillon shows how the Church moves away from a rigid interpretation towards a more empathic and pastoral understanding of the gospel as an attempt to include “irregular” Catholics, such as LGBT’s or divorced persons. Yet, despite this opening, Catholic doctrine is objectively still reluctant towards these aberrations, which pushes some persons in bifurcated identities and positions.

Dillon provides a rich account of contemporary American Catholicism, formulating profound arguments based on extensive quantitative and qualitative data. This work examines the various ways in which religion and secular aspirations intersect with each other. In a postsecular society, Dillon argues, we should approach religion and secularity as overlapping rather than distinct categories. This work can thus be considered an important contribution to the body of scholarly literature on religion, secularism, and postsecularism, although the author does not fully engage with other scholars working in this domain. While it is not specifically mentioned in the introduction, this book has quite a large focus on sexual and gendered themes. Despite the spotlight on the United States, it is possible to apply some of its insights to other societies where religion and secularism are entangled in a complex nexus. The most important insights of this work, I think, are the following. First, we should move away from the rigid binary religion versus secularism, and should take into account the interdependence of religion and secularism in a postsecular society: “in short, postsecularity means that neither religious nor secular realities can be denied” (p. 164). A second important point is that religion itself is not monolithic, but instead shaped by different opinions, and disagreements between conservative and progressive forces. Michele Dillon captures these two conclusions as an ongoing process and dialogue.

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