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Reviewed by Rachel Johnston-White, University of Groningen

How did the Catholic Church come to advocate dignity and personhood for all people, not just its own faithful? And why have so many within the Church continued to resist that universalism, choosing instead to use their religion as a weapon against those they perceive as enemies or outsiders? Piotr H. Kosicki’s engagingly written and meticulously researched monograph, Catholics on the Barricades: Poland, France, and “Revolution,” 1891-1956, reshapes our understanding of Catholicism in twentieth-century Europe by investigating a transnational group of Catholic intellectuals in Poland and France. Kosicki introduces us to “a world in which debates on personhood and social justice were consistently front and center” (83). For the often deeply spiritual Polish and French Catholics who are the subjects of this narrative, faith and politics were inextricable. Mediating the two was a set of ideas: on the one hand, experiments in Catholic thought and theology drawn from Thomas Aquinas via renowned French Catholic philosopher Jacques Maritain, Catholic social teaching beginning with Pope Leo XIII’s 1891 encyclical Rerum Novarum, and the “personalism” of Emmanuel Mounier, founder of the influential journal Esprit, and, on the other hand, Marxism. These Catholics believed fervently in their cause of remaking society in order to uphold the “dignity” of the “human person.” Nothing short of revolution, with all that that entailed, was required for this project to succeed. Theirs was a revolution “with pens and typewriters,” but for many of Kosicki’s central figures, words had tangible consequences when deployed in support of “exclusionary (or integral) nationalism, and then Stalinism as well” (3). From 1939 to 1956, this revolution inspired resistance to Nazism, new methods of evangelization, radical and even heretical theologies, and criticism of the Holy Father himself, Pope Pius XII, on both sides of the Iron Curtain.

Kosicki traces three interconnected narrative arcs, each of which spans the period from Rerum Novarum to the end of Stalinism. The first analyses how Catholic intellectuals in France and Poland grappled with Marxism as an ideology and, later, as a political system in Stalinist Poland; theirs, on the whole, was an ideological journey. The second investigates pastoral innovations, particularly related to the pressing challenge of how to minister to the de-Christianized working classes. This second strand interweaves the “new theology” of French Dominican theologians Yves Congar and Marie-Dominique Chenu, the Mission de France and the worker-priest experiment of the 1940s and 1950s, and the transformative effects of these pastoral reforms on the young Karol Wojtyla, the future Pope John Paul II. Connecting the two is the third strand: the influence of Catholic personalism, as put forward by Maritain and his younger, more radical disciple Mounier. Personalism offered Catholics a philosophy at once profoundly spiritual and inherently political. It was based upon a return to the sources (literally, ressourcement) of Christianity – St. Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, and the Bible itself; yet it also transcended the intellectual realm, calling on Catholics to help bring about a more just society here on earth in order to protect and promote the “human person” (10).

In both France and Poland, the Second World War challenged the “strict, top-down control historically exercised by bishops,” opening the way to “a different approach to Catholicism” defined by intellectual activism and a greater role for the laity (96). While personalism had made inroads among the Catholic vanguard in both countries by the 1930s, thanks to the dissemination of Maritain’s writings and – in France – the “overnight sensation” that was the journal Esprit (55), the war raised the stakes for anti-fascist Catholics. Suddenly, clandestine reading groups and secret lectures by university professors in

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2 In his discussion of the Mission de France (French Mission), the work of Sybille Chapeu might have been usefully cited, though the period it investigates mostly postdates the story Kosicki tells. Chapeu, Des chrétiens dans la guerre d’Algérie: L’action de la Mission de France (Paris: Les Éditions de l’Atelier/Éditions Ouvrières, 2004)
Poland acquired the weight of “civic duty” (78); Mounier quickly became an “ethical guide” in Polish Catholic resistance circles, especially for the young adults “expected to assume extraordinary responsibilities in society” (79, 74). In France, meanwhile, a small army of intrepid volunteers circulated the clandestine journal Cahiers du Témoignage chrétien, which had been founded by Jesuit priests who called upon Christians to engage in spiritual resistance to Nazism. The war also opened the way for practical cooperation between Communists, Socialists, and Catholics in ways that had appealed to only a tiny group of radical Catholics before 1939.

The heart of book, however, begins with the onset of the Cold War and the Stalinization of Poland. Kosicki traces the demise of Christian Democracy in Poland and its replacement with a new model of political Catholicism: Catholic socialism. As Poland turned Communist, the weekly journal Dzis i Jutro (“Today and Tomorrow”) rapidly came to occupy a predominant place in the Catholic political landscape. Led by former fascist Boleslaw Piasecki, the young Catholic idealists of the movement became “Poland’s first Catholic socialists, putting the ‘human person’ at the service of Marxist revolution for religious, as well as ethnonational, reasons” (135). Kosicki shows how this experiment in a Catholic-Marxist fusion “had a serious impact on Catholic agendas on both sides of the Iron Curtain” (301). In France, the Catholic vanguard – led by Mounier, along with his editorial assistant at Esprit, Jean-Marie Domenach, and veteran of Témoignage chrétien and anti-colonial activist André Mandouze – looked to Poland as the embodiment of the personalist revolution they so desired (301). French Catholic intellectuals visited Poland on numerous occasions and met with local Catholic activists; Mounier quickly declared his admiration for Dzis i Jutro, the most radical of the groups, even when that movement threw its moral weight behind the new Stalinist regime to the point of excluding the state imprisonment of Catholic bishops. As Kosicki incisively puts it, “Mounier’s loyalty to ‘revolution’ was so total that he ultimately proved willing to sacrifice the dignity of individual persons in the service of Soviet collectivism” (142). Mounier died of a heart attack in March 1950 at the age of 44 before ever acknowledging his mistake.

Between 1952 and 1955, however, the young writers for Dzis i Jutro – now part of a movement rechristened as PAX – started to take “seriously the evident contradictions between Catholic metaphysics and Marxist pluralism” (286). For Tadeusz Mazowiecki (who would later become Poland’s first non-Communist prime minister in 1989), Janusz Zablocki, and their like-minded colleagues, this belated realization led them to abandon their earlier moral and political rigidity in favor of plurality and openness to dialogue. They ceased to defend Stalinism and criticized both the theology and the thinly veiled political aspirations of their erstwhile leader Piasecki, who, along with the true believers of Dzis i Jutro and later PAX, had been all too willing to sell “personhood out to autocraty” (301). The experiment in Catholic socialism did, however, foster the emergence of humanist and revisionist politics in Poland, which were taken up by Catholic and Marxist activists alike after de-Stalinization. Decades later, some of these same Catholic socialists – now ‘deradicalized’ – put their commitment to the rights of the human person into practice with the Solidarity trade union.

Karol Wojtyla, the future Pope John Paul II, is, for Kosicki, the central figure of the non-Marxist side of this story: the “personalist revolution” (310). Personalism eventually led Wojtyla to a recognition of the humanity and personhood of all people, whether Catholic believers or not (310). Wojtyla never so much as flirted with Catholic socialism, and unlike the radicals of Dzis i Jutro or the intellectuals of Esprit, he rejected the idea that revolution could only be accomplished by embracing Marxism. Yet he, too, was profoundly marked by French Catholic thought, especially the ‘new theology’ that inspired the Mission de France and the worker-priest movement. The call for Catholics – both laity and clergy – to go out and

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engage with workers in the places where they lived and worked resonated with him to the point that he extended a visit to Belgium in order to act as a temporary replacement pastor for a Polish workers’ community in Charleroi. This was, in effect, “an apprenticeship in the life of a worker-priest” (205). The worker-priest movement itself would not last long, falling victim to Pius XII’s zeal for condemnations of any innovation bordering on progressivism, yet it greatly influenced Wojtyła’s trajectory from the doctoral student of an archconservative mentor in Rome to the humanist pope he eventually became.

*Catholics on the Barricades* is a particularly successful contribution to a subgenre of intellectual and political history constructed around a collective biography of a movement’s key figures and the ideas, beliefs, and ideals that they embraced. In his portrait of Polish and French intellectuals and their pursuit of ‘revolution,’ Kosicki draws evident inspiration from the work of Marci Shore, especially her first book *Caviar and Ashes,* and the late Tony Judt’s *Past Imperfect,* a masterful but rather less sympathetic exegesis of intellectuals and their ideals. As such, the book makes extensive use of the publications of its major characters, supplemented by a thorough investigation of archival primary sources. Of the latter, most striking are the numerous letters between individuals based in Poland and France, tangible illustrations of the intellectual connections Kosicki so elegantly draws between the two countries. Kosicki deftly bridges Poland and France, showing how French Catholic thought influenced Polish Catholic intellectuals, and how Poland in turn decisively shaped how French Catholics understood Marxism, Stalinism, and the possibility of a revolutionary ‘Catholic socialism.’ Kosicki’s monograph also forms part of a raft of excellent recent and forthcoming works investigating the role of religious people and figures in the construction of twentieth century thought and the political implications of these ideas. Alongside the work of James Chappel, Sarah Shortall, Udi Greenberg, Giuliana Chamedes, Sam Moyn, and Marco Duranti, among others, Kosicki makes a compelling case that the history of the European twentieth century cannot be understood without reference to Christianity.

Kosicki has a remarkable ability to bring his cast of characters to life. Choice quotations capture vivid snapshots of personality, as in the opening image of Jean-Marie Domenach, then the editor of *Esprit,* reveling in the news of Pius XII’s death: “The Stalin of the Church is dead. It is a joy” (1); or Polish writer Czesław Miłosz commenting that he and writer Jerzy Andrzejewski “confessed to each other that the asceticism and the depth and nobility of spiritual self-reflection awakened only our appetites for vodka and juicy steaks” (71). Such wry moments make this no ordinary work of intellectual history, for the book presents these figures as sincere, deeply flawed, yet utterly human people. Kosicki is sympathetic to the genuine concerns they held—a desire for peace and fear of nuclear warfare; a thirst for a more just world; deep spirituality—while never holding back from critiquing their choices when justified.

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One of the major arguments of the book is that the personalist ‘revolution’ advocated not only by Polish Catholic socialists but also by their French counterparts was doomed to failure from the outset, because it adopted an exclusionary definition of personhood. That is, certain categories of people – Jews, Germans, non-Catholics, perceived enemies of Marxism – were not endowed with personhood or the human dignity that accompanied it. This assertion is the key to Kosicki’s interpretation of personalism and its political implications, yet I sensed some tension in this argument throughout the book. On the one hand, Kosicki argues that the expression of ideology depends upon historical contingency; that is, the context in which personalism evolved, and the political and personal circumstances of the Catholics who grappled with personalism, determined its meaning at a given time or place (13). On the other hand, personalism appears to have certain fixed, albeit contradictory, properties. First, personalism holds the promise of universal recognition of the human dignity of others. This is the conclusion that the future Pope John Paul II drew in the wake of Vatican II. But Kosicki also repeatedly suggests that personalism had “total” – even totalitarian – aspects inherent to it as a politico-spiritual ideology. This dark side of personalism “poisoned” the revolution from the outset (4), with integral nationalism, ethnonational hatred, and even anti-Semitism not so much a flaw but a feature of personalism on both sides of the Iron Curtain. How, then, should we reconcile historical contingency with personalism as a spiritual and political ideology? In other words, to what extent are universal and/or exclusionary elements integral to personalism as a philosophy, or are they contingent upon the historical circumstances of the actors that embraced personalism? Perhaps, given the vagueness of personalism as an ideology – which is undoubtedly compounded by the shifting politics of Mounier himself – such a distinction is impossible. Kosicki clearly recognizes these contradictions of personalist philosophy, sometimes referring to personalism in the plural, as “personalisms,” as a way around this issue (10, 23, 46, 60).

Linked to the argument about the dark side of personalism is the strong critique Kosicki offers of French and Polish radical Catholics who “chose the legacy of the real Stalin” over the ecclesiastical hierarchy of the Church (258). According to Kosicki, “the imperative of waging ‘revolution’ warranted dissent from the Vatican” for these Catholics, some of whom saw fit to excuse the imprisonment of bishops in Stalinist Poland (277). Kosicki argues that this misguided obsession with ‘revolution,’ and the accompanying belief that the ends of social justice and personhood justified nearly any means to achieve them, led to these grave errors. In France, resentment at the suppression of the ‘new theology’ and the worker-priest movement also played a role, with the writers of Esprit fully expecting to be next on the list of condemnations handed down from the Vatican (258). One of the many strengths of Catholics on the Barricades is its investigation of the intellectual and spiritual processes by which this minority of Catholic activists concluded that they could still “call themselves ‘Catholic’ while flouting the Vatican’s Cold War policy” (172). Yet I would suggest that Kosicki has somewhat misread the reasons for the strong anti-authoritarian streak of French Catholic radicals. The events of the Second World War proved decisive in this respect, for two reasons. The first is that, through cooperation in resistance organizations like Témoignage chrétien, Protestant theology on the state and authority started to influence Catholic activism. Secondly, Catholic radicals perceived the actions of the French Catholic hierarchy during the war as an unforgivable betrayal and abdication of responsibility. Both trends facilitated Catholic activists’ subsequent rejection of ecclesiastical authority.

As Kosicki notes, the most important figures of the French Catholic vanguard had transformative experiences in the anti-Nazi and anti-Vichy resistance during the Second World War. Some, like Mounier, started off on the wrong side and therefore, to quote Tony Judt, “did not have a ‘good war’.”

Others, like the Catholics of the Témoignage chrétien movement, took a clear stand against anti-Semitism in the April 1942 issue of the journal; they were, importantly, also influenced by Protestant thought on resistance, especially that of Swiss theologian Karl Barth, whose writings were translated and

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7 Judt, 89.
disseminated in France by Swiss pastor Roland de Pury, the most influential Protestant to work alongside the Jesuit founders of the Cahiers du témoignage chrétien. Including Protestantism in this story – at least on the French side, given the religious homogeneity of postwar Poland – might have opened up new perspectives on the dramatic transformation of Catholicism that Kosicki traces. It was precisely in this period that intellectual and practical collaboration across denominational divides began in earnest, with consequences for both politics and theology.

No matter the ambiguities of their own wartime trajectories, French Catholic radicals all agreed on the moral deficiencies of the Catholic hierarchy in France. Although five bishops and archbishops issued denunciations of French deportations of Jews, this did not spare them from criticism by the Catholic resistance after the Liberation. André Mandouze addressed a letter to Monsignor Jean Delay, Bishop of Marseille and one of the five who protested the treatment of Jews, that “if a certain number of your sons had not had the courage to disobey you for four years to obey their conscience, neither you, nor the greater part of your colleagues would currently occupy your episcopal palaces.” Domenach shared these views, as Kosicki notes, writing of the “many young Christians obliged to rely on their consciences and sometimes even to challenge the directives of certain bishops” (70). These same bishops had, on many occasions, sought to discredit the Témoignage chrétien movement, calling its founders “theologians without a mandate” and warning the Catholic faithful against what they called “anonymous propaganda.” Catholic radicals therefore had ample reason to consider both the French hierarchy and the Vatican morally bankrupt after the war. I would suggest that it was this perception of an ecclesiastical failure of leadership during the war that provided the necessary conditions for Catholic radicals like Mandouze, Domenach, and others to feel justified in rebelling against the institutional Church on matters of conscience. This is not to excuse their seemingly willful blindness to the Stalinist regime, but rather to contextualize their stance in light of the equally real collaboration of much of the Catholic hierarchy with the Vichy regime and even the Nazi occupation.

These quibbles in interpretation do not, however, detract from the remarkable achievements of Kosicki’s narrative. Catholics on the Barricades is a vital contribution to ongoing debates on the influence of religious thought and practice on politics and society across Europe. Kosicki deftly shows how the spiritual and intellectual battles his actors waged within and amongst themselves shaped the world around them far beyond the confines of activist circles in Poland and France. Though Catholic socialism failed disastrously to bring about a revolution for social justice, the legacy of personalism transformed how the contemporary Catholic Church defines personhood; no longer the sole preserve of Catholics, it now

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9 While research examining European Catholicism alongside Protestantism is somewhat lacking, some recent work including Darcie Fontaine, Decolonizing Christianity: Religion and the End of Empire in France and Algeria (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Moyn, Christian Human Rights; Pelletier and Schlegel, À la gauche du Christ; Sabine Rousseau, La colombe et le napalm: des chrétiens français contre les guerres d’Indochine et du Vietnam: 1945-1975 (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2002); and Limore Yagil, Chrétiens et juifs sous Vichy, 1940-1944: sauvetage et désobéissance civile (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 2005) show how French Protestants and Catholics were in dialogue on many of the most pressing issues of the day, including anti-Nazi resistance, Marxism, human rights, and the question of decolonization. My own work takes up these lines of inquiry to show how a “Protestantization” of Catholic conscience took place in France from the 1930s to the 1960s. On this, see Rachel Johnston-White, “A New Primacy of Conscience? Conscientious Objection, French Catholicism and the State during the Algerian War,” Journal of Contemporary History 54:1 (January 2019): 112-138.
encompasses all people. Yet Kosicki also shows that some of the challenges mid-twentieth century Catholics faced have not altogether vanished. Nationalism is on the rise again and with it, the same exclusionary impulses that fueled the religious, ethnic, and national hatreds of the early and mid-twentieth century. Kosicki suggests that personalism has, in the past, acted as a double-edged sword, enabling both exclusion and inclusion. The institutional Church itself likewise contains within it both defenders of Vatican II and its increasingly empowered critics. Whether Catholics and the Church opt on balance for radical interpersonal solidarity or a return to exclusionary integralism remains an essential question.