Jack Lee Downey

The Bread of the Strong: Lacouterisme and the Folly of the Cross, 1910–1985. New York: Fordham University Press, 2015. Pp. 280. Hb, \$60.

Decades ago, scholars of Catholicism in the United States devoted much of their attention to the story of the Americanization of Catholics. Now the intellectual worm has turned, as has the generally positive appreciation for American values that informed those accounts. Some of today's scholars are more attracted to unusual Catholic characters and practices of the past that did not fit smoothly into the American landscape. That is the case here. Like Paula Kane's recent *Sister Thorn and Catholic Mysticism in Modern America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015)—the study of a largely obscure cloistered New York sister who experienced the stigmata and challenged emerging American religiosity in the 1920s—Jack Lee Downey's *The Bread of the Strong: Lacouterisme and the Folly of the Cross* focuses on the life, career, and legacy of a highly controversial early twentieth-century French Canadian Jesuit, Onésime (English: Onesimus) Lacouture (1881–1951).

Downey essentially tells the story of how Lacouture developed his fervently “ascetic, mystical, antimodernism” and then spread it among “enthusiastic vowed religious whose dormant restlessness at Catholic accommodation to secularism was primed” (117). After a set of intense, mystical experiences in what he called the “White Desert” of a remote missionary outpost in Alaska, where the young scholastic had been assigned by his Jesuit superiors, Lacouture emerged to proclaim himself the leader of a fierce assault on the worldly, compromising “pagan Catholicism” that he believed pervaded not only ordinary Canadian Catholic practice, but his own Jesuit order as well. Drawing on his own experiences and understanding of models from St. John of the Cross to St. Francis Xavier and the seventeenth-century Jesuit “North American martyrs,” Lacouture conceived and promoted what he called the only brand of “authentic Christianity.” This involved leading severely ascetic retreats as well as delivering stinging critiques of “conventual” priests (including their smoking, among other things), and eventually led to running battles with his Jesuit superiors. After years of trying to temper and control Lacouture, the Jesuit hierarchy finally stripped him of his priestly faculties and shipped him off to “exile” in Santa Barbara, California, and other distant locales.

While Lacouture's countercultural religious worldview and practices plainly emerged from the highly distinctive Catholic subculture of Quebec, for a time he developed a small, vocal following not only in French Canada but in the United States as well. Downey traces the career of Lacouture's most ardent American disciple, Father John Hugo, a Pittsburgh diocesan priest who in the

1940s led Lacouture retreats for, among others, Dorothy Day and members of the Catholic Worker movement. Hugo was a diocesan priest who shared much of Lacouture's combative temperament and fierce critiques of the compromising "attachments" to worldly pleasures of ordinary Catholicism, as well as of then-prevalent neo-Thomist theology. Hugo's publications, especially *Applied Christianity* (New York: 1944), provoked harsh criticism and debates in mainstream Catholic theological journals, where Hugo was accused of "Gnosticism, Jansenism, and Lutheranism" among other heresies, and charged with "exaggerated supernaturalism" (159). Unlike his model and mentor Lacouture, however, Hugo was protected by his superiors, especially Pittsburgh bishop Hugh Boyle, and so enjoyed a long clerical career that included active advocacy for labor and social justice.

Downey's account of these controversies is thoroughly researched and highly informative, although the book gets off to a dense start. By page ten, Downey has already invoked a legion of high cultural theorists, including Judith Butler, Walter Benjamin, Emmanuel Levinas, Bruno Latour, Theodore Adorno, Stephen Schloesser, and Svetlana Boym. Deploying terms like "Sanjuanist detachment" and "ciscultural vitality," he defines his task in terms that may not exactly invite some readers: "It may often be the metahistorian's job to lump and draw wide-ranging connections—but the tendency toward universalism benefits by being tempered by a diasporic recognition of the particularity of enculturation, and the often thin bonds that undergird pan-identity group narratives—but it may be worth interrogating whether the depiction of the margins as reifying the center unnecessarily itself further solidifies anti-liberationist cultural presumptions" (14).

But once the narrative and analysis gets under way, *The Bread of the Strong* offers a rich and often provocative interpretation of the entire world of French Canadian (Quebecois) Catholicism from which Lacouturism emerged. It effectively describes and interprets its religious and cultural dynamics both in its homeland and among the immigrants who carried it to the United States, especially in New England. (Downey cites perhaps the best known American of French Canadian parentage, the Beat writer Jack Kerouac). He proves an astute interpreter of the dynamics of cultural thrust and counterthrust, and of the ways that religious and cultural cross-currents can swirl in multiple directions at once, while simultaneously reinforcing social conflict. "Francophone Catholics were not patently wrong to think that English Canadians wanted to assimilate them, politically, linguistically, religiously, and culturally," he asserts, "and English Protestants were not necessarily that far off base in their suspicious that some within the Québécois community harbored insurgent tendencies. On both ends of the spectrum, extremist discourse tapped into the very

real, irreconcilable differences that formed the bedrock of Anglo-French conflict" (46).

The degree of Lacouturism's influence and enduring impact in both Canada and the United States is of course highly debatable, as questions of influence often are. In Quebec, as Downey notes, the "Quiet Revolution" of the 1960s and 1970s eventually eroded the long-embedded Catholic subculture at its very roots. For Dorothy Day and some of the Catholic Workers, "the retreat" was plainly important in the 1940s. Its ascetic discipline and rigor was attractive at a time when the once-burgeoning movement was experiencing loss and division, especially over pacifism. But even among Day's close associates, as Downey notes, many who initially felt invigorated by its rigor "soon backslid upon reentry into normal society" and "suffered deep existential wounds as a result" (197). One longtime Catholic Worker, Stanley Vishnewski, not only resented the "ghastly" food but found that "the constant, forced refrain of 'Rejoice!' grated on him like nails on a chalkboard."

Whatever its precise historical importance or resonance, in retrospect Lacouturism seems a distinct product of its place and time. The world of pre-Vatican II Catholic and Jesuit spirituality, which still had deep taproots in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Catholic Reformation forms of religious asceticism, would eventually come to seem to most Canadian—and American—Catholics as remote and severe as Lacouture's "White Desert" in Anilukhtakpak, Alaska. It is a mark of Downey's imaginative engagement with his subject that *The Bread of the Strong* makes that world come vividly alive. In his introduction, he expresses the hope that "some of this analytical gaze will be taken in the spirit in which it is offered and not be interpreted as snide, opportunistic, or slanderous—although this caveat may be more a reflection of my own neuroses than a sound-minded foreshadowing of things to come in the book" (18). He need not have worried. *The Bread of the Strong* is a valuable study.

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