



UNION

*Religious Worlds of New York* • *Curriculum Development Project*

## **Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker Movement** *George Ovit, Albuquerque Academy, Albuquerque, NM*

### **Abstract**

This curriculum unit examines the role played by Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker Movement during the second wave of progressive reform, beginning in 1933. Day represented a radical strain of Roman Catholicism, committed to bringing those portions of the Gospels concerned with social justice to the poorest populations of New York City. This exploration of Day and the movement she founded will introduce students to the lived experience of progressive Catholicism – showing how a deeply-held faith has been applied to the problems of those dispossessed by American capitalism.

This unit was developed for use in an advanced placement American History course at an independent school New Mexico.

### **Background**

One of the major topics covered in my class during the spring term is the history of the Progressive movement. Beginning with the rural Granges, and then with the Populists and the Greenback Party, rural Americans began in the 1870's and 80's to protest the stranglehold of corporate capitalism over American economic and social life. In particular, the Populists demanded federal regulation of railroads, whose monopolistic practices led to a conspiracy to raise freight rates, and the easing of farmers' debt by allowing for inflationary bimetallism. This reform movement expanded to American cities after the Panic of 1893. New York, Chicago, and Philadelphia in particular were crowded with Eastern European immigrants who found themselves living in teeming, under-serviced neighborhoods (c.f. Jacob Riis); working in unsafe, inhuman conditions (c.f. Upton Sinclair); despised by nativist groups, and demonized for their "un-American" cultural and religious practices.

Theodore Roosevelt is often credited with initiating the Progressive movement—and a Progressive Party in 1912—but the true progressive spirit arose from below, with reformers driven by religious or political conviction to ameliorate the horrendous living conditions of the immigrant classes. Although the Republican Party, committed to free-markets, small government, and self-help (as opposed to government aid) recaptured the White House and the national spirit in 1920 (Harding’s “return to normalcy”), the catastrophic economic and social dislocations of the Depression rekindled the progressive spirit—market cycles and Hoover’s tariffs and tax cuts exacerbated the nation’s woes—and led to the election of Franklin D. Roosevelt in a landslide in 1932. The misery of the urban working classes during the Depression came close to causing a genuine American Revolution as socialist, communist, and anarchist parties appealed to masses of the disenfranchised who had nothing to lose. Progressivism, like the New Deal, was a reformist rather than a revolutionary movement; one might argue that it saved capitalism from self-destruction.

### **Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker**

Dorothy Day, born in Brooklyn in 1897, was moved by her family’s difficult economic circumstances, the lives of immigrant New Yorkers, her reading of Peter Kropotkin, and her associates in Greenwich Village (where she wrote for *The Masses*), to join the IWW and to associate herself with the Communist Party, although, as her biographer Paul Elie has written, “Her comrades said she would never be a good Communist, because she was too religious—a character out of Dostoevsky, a woman haunted by God.” Her spiritual journey—from Episcopalian to agnostic to Roman Catholic—parallels in some ways that of other politically and socially committed individuals of this period (e.g. Thomas Merton). Day, like other socially-committed Roman Catholics, was influenced by Pope Leo XIII’s *Rerum Novarum*, which argued for the human right to earn a decent living. As one scholar put it, “Day came to believe that private property, economic cooperation, and community are essential pillars for peace and that their true foundation is the unity of persons in the mystical body of Christ.”<sup>1</sup>

Day converted to Catholicism in 1927 and later became an oblate<sup>2</sup> of the Benedictine Order. Day’s spirituality had a powerful social component from the outset; indeed, one might see her conversion as the culmination of a lifetime of searching for a way to express her deep conviction that at the heart of religion lies a concern for the “poor and despised.”

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.baylor.edu/content/services/document.php/53381.pdf> for a clear overview of the philosophical influences on Day and Maurin.

<sup>2</sup> One who follows some of the disciplines of the order without taking final vows.



Dorothy Day in 1933

On May Day, 1933, together with Peter Maurin, began the Catholic Worker Movement with the publication of *The Catholic Worker*. The newspaper (still published) advocates for pacifism, support for the oppressed and despised segments of American society, and the cultivation of a “Catholic social conscience.” The institutional Roman Catholic Church objected strenuously to Dorothy Day’s work, tinged as it was by socialist, communist, and anarchist ideas and language. However, Day was revered by those of other religious faiths, and by political activists, who also were struggling for social justice.

## **Pedagogy**

For this unit I plan to have my students read several of Day’s essays and to show a portion of the documentary film made about her life.<sup>3</sup> I will stress that Day’s version of “lived religion” was opposed by the institutional Catholic Church in order to demonstrate the tension that existed during the 1930’s (and later) between conflicting views of the Gospel message, views that divided even further with the commencement of the Cold War.

Note: I have only written here of my (new) unit on Dorothy Day; I also plan to include a portion of a class on Rufus Jones, the great Quaker activist, and co-founder of the American Friends Service Committee. These discussions will be in addition to my discussion of better-known Progressives who also happened to be religious, especially Walter Rauschenbusch.

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<sup>3</sup> See <http://dorothydaydoc.com> a fine documentary on Dorothy Day, “Don’t Call Me a Saint,” and <http://www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday> for a selection of Day’s writings

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