

**SYMPOSIUM:  
A CATHOLIC APPROACH TO HISTORY**

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*Lead Article, Christopher Shannon*

Responses by:  
Tom Jodziewicz, John Quinn  
Paul Radzilowski, Adam Tate

**A CATHOLIC APPROACH TO HISTORY**

***Christopher Shannon***  
*Christendom College*

*The growing sway of postmodernism over the intellectual life of the contemporary academy has lead many scholars to question conventional, post-Enlightenment notions of objectivity in historical inquiry. As universal History gives way to particular histories rooted in racial, ethnic, class, or gender identities, Catholics need to rethink their relation to objectivity. The current postmodern moment provides an opportunity for Catholics to reclaim a distinctly Catholic approach to history. Catholics may applaud the deconstruction of Enlightenment objectivity without endorsing a facile relativism in which Catholicism appears as simply one among many competing perspectives. Catholics should read postmodernism itself as a distortion of certain authentic Catholic insights on the need to root inquiry in authoritative communities of interpretation. Catholic history may benefit from the rigorous empirical standards of modern secular history, but it must never let those standards serve as the ultimate arbiter of the moral and spiritual truths that speak to us through history. The patristic tradition of the “four senses of scripture” offers a fruitful model for how postmodern Catholic historians might order the empirical and spiritual concerns of historical inquiry.*

Christianity, along with Judaism, is the most historical of faiths. Most of the sacred texts of the Old and New Testaments deal with historical events, and the ultimate truth of Christianity depends on the historical reality of the Incarnation of Jesus Christ in a particular place at a particular time. The New Testament gives us not simply the life and teaching of Jesus and their interpretation by St. Paul, but the Acts of the Apostles, a history of the first generation of the Church. The lifting of

the Roman persecutions in the early 4th century inspired not simply thanks and praise, but a historical reflection on those persecutions, Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History of the Church*. When the dream of a Christian Roman empire seemed to collapse in the early 5th century, the great Church father St. Augustine wrote *The City of God* to explain the collapse as not simply a consequence of human sinfulness, but an episode in God's providential plan of history. History, unlike most of the modern disciplines of the social sciences, has firm roots in the Catholic intellectual tradition. Catholics have been writing history of one kind or another for as long as there have been Catholics. The answer to the question, "What is a Catholic approach to history?" seems simple: continue to do what other Catholics have done before.

That answer actually held up fairly well until quite recently. The last hundred or so years have, however, cast doubts upon the viability of that answer. Founded in 1884, the American Historical Association has struggled to define the discipline of history as something more than literature but less than science; however, it has consistently and unambiguously rejected any kind of confessional history as incompatible with the theoretical middle ground of common-sense empiricism that shapes conventional professional practice.<sup>1</sup> In this essay, I would like to examine the history of the Church's engagement with modern secular historical thinking as a cautionary tale with lessons to teach those of us concerned to write history from a Catholic perspective. Catholic history may indeed benefit from more rigorous models of empirical verification bequeathed by modern secular history, but history will be Catholic only to the degree to which historians understand these facts within one of the various interpretive frameworks offered by the Church.

The issue of the framework is the line in the sand separating Catholic from secular history. The modern profession of history was born in a rejection of all received interpretive frameworks, secular as well as religious. Despite their insistence on specialization and greater empirical rigor, the first generation of professional historians, men like Frederick Jackson Turner, Charles Beard, and Vernon Louis Parrington, looked down on the previous generation more for their lack of detachment than for a lack of details. They dismissed George Bancroft's sweeping *History of the United States* because it offered a history of Andrew Jackson from the perspective of a Jacksonian Democrat, thus reducing history to political propaganda at best, or autobiography at worst.<sup>2</sup> The new historians committed themselves to the ideal of writing history free from such personal and political biases. They understood historical inquiry as the pursuit of empirically verifiable facts about the

past and the establishment of verifiable relations of cause and effect among these facts.

Catholic historians of this era both resisted and supported these new developments in historical inquiry. They accepted the new professionalism enough to form their own organization, The American Catholic Historical Association, founded by Peter Guilday in 1919. Still, they felt the need for a distinct Catholic organization stemmed from an understanding of the anti-Catholic bias in a secular/Protestant organization such as the AHA, as well as at least some sense of there being a distinct Catholic approach to history. At the level of practical scholarship, a Catholic approach amounted mostly to a preference for Catholic topics and a readiness to provide a sympathetic account of Catholic action in history. A not particularly well thought out half-way covenant with the new professional model of history, Catholic history writing in the first half of the twentieth century affirmed the need for empirical rigor and accuracy yet rejected the moral relativism that often wove itself in and out of the rhetoric of professional “objectivity.”

As in so many other aspects of American life and thought, World War II changed everything. Secularists reeling from the moral shock of the Holocaust tempered their earlier cavalier relativism and began to express a certain sympathy for religion. Catholics, on the other hand, attained a new level of acceptance in the mainstream of American society. Once again, the Holocaust is the key. Hitler’s attempt to exterminate the Jews de-legitimated all forms of bigotry, religious as well as racial; anti-Catholicism of the type on national display as recently as the 1928 presidential race between Al Smith and Herbert Hoover was no longer acceptable. At the same time, the Cold War boosted Catholics to center stage in the shaping of U.S. foreign policy by virtue of their longstanding and unquestionable anti-communism. At the same time, the domestic baby boom seemed to confirm the traditional Catholic commitment to large families, while the popular culture of the era offered up fictional and real-life models of Catholic priests as comforting authority figures who could speak to the nation as a whole.<sup>3</sup>

This climate of acceptance gradually wore away at the residual tribalism that inspired the formation of distinct Catholic professional associations such as the American Catholic Historical Association. Leading Catholic academics of the postwar period began to argue that intellectual separatism was no longer necessary and actually served as a mask for underachievement. The high (or low) point of this internal attack on Catholic intellectual life is, of course, the historian John Tracy Ellis’ 1955 essay, “American Catholics and the Intellectual Life.”<sup>4</sup> The presence of a figure like Ellis seemed to belie the indictment; if he was

not a representative Catholic historian, it is safe to say that Edmund Morgan and Richard Hofstadter were hardly representative secular historians. Still, there is no denying that whatever the overall state of Catholic intellectual life at the time, Catholics were strongest in philosophy and theology and weakest in the natural and social sciences at a time when the latter disciplines served as the universal, indisputable gold standard for intellectual achievement. It is no coincidence that a historian, as opposed to a theologian, rang the alarm bell for Catholic intellectual life. Ellis inspired the next generation of Catholic intellectuals to solve this problem by adopting secular standards and beating the secularists at their own game. This program seemed to receive the imprimatur of the Church itself through the concept of *Aggiornamento* coming out of the Second Vatican Council.

American Catholic historians have been particularly notorious for their toeing of the Ellis line, in both subject matter and method. The two generations since Ellis—let us call them the Jay Dolan generation and the John McGreevy generation—have dedicated their professional lives to telling the story of the “tension” between Catholicism and American freedom. In this master narrative, the “tension” should, but never quite fully does, resolve itself by Catholicism submitting itself to American freedom, even on those points at which that freedom is at odds with Catholic teaching.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, these generations have shown a slavish devotion to the common-sense empiricism that continues to shape much of the mainstream professional practice of monograph writing. In an influential 1971 essay, “Reform, Historical Consciousness, and Vatican II’s *Aggiornamento*,” John W. O’Malley summed up the relation between this naturalism and any kind of Catholic providentialism as follows: “God may have hardened Pharaoh’s heart, but the historian is interested only in the contingent social, economic, and psychological factors which were at work on Pharaoh.”<sup>6</sup> Here we have a clear line in the sand: providentialism is for theologians, natural causality is for historians, and never should the twain meet in any properly academic setting.

Any serious discussion of a Catholic view of history must begin by exploding the comfortable fiction of this strict separation between natural causality and supernatural providence. Philip Gleason, certainly the most thoughtful observer of these developments during the era of Vatican II, long ago argued that O’Malley was in effect exchanging one providentialism for another—simply trading Catholic theology for secular philosophy. When O’Malley speaks of “the discontinuity of the past” and the absence of “any overarching divine plan,” or when he asserts that the “past is human . . . to be understood in terms of man, who

is free and contingent,” he is simply speaking the language and invoking the framework of existential philosophy—that is, trading St. Augustine for Jean Paul Sartre.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, though at a much lower level of philosophic angst, the Americanism that shapes the work of Dolan and McGreevy provides a framework no less neutral or empirical than any that a Catholic might draw from theology.

I think in particular of John McGreevy’s recent *Catholicism and American Freedom*, a book universally praised by the Catholic historical establishment in America. With the exception of the early chapter on slavery and the later chapters on life issues, much of the work is simply a well-written re-hashing of themes covered by Dolan. Though he spends two whole chapters on “life”—that is, birth control, abortion, euthanasia and biological engineering—he concludes the work with an account of the priest sex-abuse scandal as a symptom of the Church’s inability to overcome its inherent (and un-American) authoritarianism. I am the last one to want to let anyone off the hook in the scandal, but surely American freedom itself has an even greater scandal in the 40 million or so abortions performed since the 1973 Supreme Court ruling of *Roe v. Wade*. McGreevy’s treatment of abortion is fairly balanced and I know him to be personally opposed to it, but like many a Catholic politician, McGreevy seems to think that his public professional life requires neutrality on Catholic issues even as it allows for heavy partisanship on secular issues. McGreevy’s righteous anger at the clergy sex-abuse scandal follows the righteous anger he expressed on Catholic racism in his first book, *Parish Boundaries*.<sup>8</sup> I have no objection to him taking a stand on these issues; I simply call to attention the hypocrisy of his silence on the most pressing Catholic moral issue of our time.

So, is Catholic history simply history that takes a partisan Catholic position? Of course not. The very notion of partisanship implies some alternative neutrality or objectivity, and these are the notions we must call into question if we are to be able to present Catholic history as something other than propaganda (in the worst sense of that word). To help think our way out of the false dichotomy between objectivity and propaganda, I think it is instructive to return to the work of Philip Gleason. I have the utmost respect for Philip Gleason as a historian and as a Catholic intellectual. He would be the first to admit that he is no theorist; I intend no disrespect for him in my criticisms. Gleason’s critique of O’Malley was part of a larger critique of trends in post-Vatican II history writing that Gleason felt compromised common-sense empiricism in the service of some ulterior agenda, be it philosophical, as in the case of O’Malley, or political, as in the case of activist scholars such as David O’Brien. Gleason’s alternative amounts

to little more than an affirmation of what he admits to be a simple “common-sense realism.” Abjuring extreme, absolutist standards of objectivity and neutrality, Gleason insists that we can determine, within the limits of available empirical evidence, what actually did or did not happen in the past. Historians must be aware of those limits and open to revising their account as new evidence appears, but rational procedures exist that can verify the reliability of such evidence as it appears.<sup>9</sup>

Of course, professional historians should be more than antiquarian fact gatherers. Gleason goes on to offer a three-stage model for historical inquiry: first, at the level of “fact,” the historian asks the question, “What happened?”; second, at the level of “explanation,” the historian asks, “Why did it happen?”; third, at the level of “evaluation,” the historian asks “Was its having happened good or bad?” Gleason qualifies this three-fold model in every way imaginable, but all concessions to complexity accounted for, it seems like a fairly accurate model of how most historians understand their craft.<sup>10</sup>

However common, this model is far from Catholic. It presents not simply a three-fold division, but an implicit descending trajectory from fact to opinion. Historians have proven quite competent in clarifying the basic “neutral” facts of a bewildering array of historical incidences. In our post-Enlightenment world, there is no rational way to move from is to ought, so evaluative judgments are outside the proper sphere of historical argumentation. Between fact and opinion, there lies the middle ground of prudential judgment, which historians bring to bear on the second level of inquiry, the explanatory. At this level, reasonable people can disagree and still be reasonable; such reasonable disagreement in fact drives the process of historical revision that has become the *raison d’être* of the profession itself. Revision signifies progress in historical interpretation. But how can you determine progress—that is, a new interpretation being better than an old one—if evaluative judgments are by nature mere opinion? Well, this is where the fudging starts, and I will not venture into the quagmire of the hermeneutic circle in this essay. My point here is simply that evaluative judgments are unavoidable, but the common sense of the profession pretends to exclude them from historical interpretation. Leaving aside the “fact” that secular historians always bring in moral judgments—think of any history of race relations, for example—we need to determine where Catholics should stand in relation to this common sense.

First, we must reject the fiction of the fact/value distinction. Every fact has some moral meaning because it exists as part of a larger moral universe. Gleason’s example to illustrate his three-fold model is

particularly instructive on this account. Consider the “fact” that a married couple, John and Mary have recently divorced. A Catholic historian may very well agree with a secular historian that the reasons for the divorce are very complex and open to reasonable disagreement by rational men of good will. A Catholic historian could not accept addressing the explanatory issue apart from the moral issue of divorce itself; moreover, a Catholic historian should insist that, at a certain point, concern for establishing the basic facts and possible causes of the divorce will actually detract from our appreciation of the moral stakes of divorce itself. Excessive concern with explanatory causality reduces divorce to an interesting puzzle, a historical brainteaser to occupy the curiosity of scholars who have forgotten the purpose of historical inquiry as a means of reflecting on God’s providential plan for man living in time.<sup>11</sup>

This temptation has faced historians and theologians alike since ancient times. Plutarch, in justifying the choice of subjects for his *Lives*, recalled an anecdote from the life of Caesar:

Caesar once, seeing some wealthy strangers at Rome, carrying up and down with them in their arms and bosoms young puppy-dogs and monkeys, embracing and making much of them, took occasion not unnaturally to ask whether the women in their country were not used to bear children; by that prince-like reprimand gravely reflecting upon persons who spend and lavish upon brute beasts that affection and kindness which nature has implanted in us to be bestowed on those of our own kind. With like reason may we blame those who misuse that love of inquiry and observation which nature has implanted in our souls, by expending it on objects unworthy of the attention either of their eyes or their ears, while they disregard such as are excellent in themselves, and would do good.<sup>12</sup>

Good history, especially good Catholic history, requires moral judgment in the selection of topics and in the focus of study within each topic. Gleason’s three-tiered model recalls something of the model of the three or four senses of scripture that developed during the patristic period. Of course, modern historians completely reverse the hierarchy of interpretive levels. For a figure like St. Augustine, the literal or factual meaning of scripture was but one of the four senses of scripture—*historia*, *allegoria*, *analogia*, and *aetiologia*—and by no means the most important. Augustine explicitly warned against a preoccupation with accuracy that came at the expense of reflection on the spiritual

significance of texts.<sup>13</sup> The same interpretive standards applied to the world, which classical and medieval Christians understood as a repository of spiritual truths. As the historian Peter Harrison has commented in his great little book, *The Bible, Protestantism, and the Rise of Natural Science*, for Christians working within this interpretive framework, “To be concerned with natural objects alone was to be ‘a slave to the sign’: it was to engage in an idolatrous ‘literalism’ applied to objects.”<sup>14</sup>

The common-sense empiricism invoked by Gleason and endorsed by most faithful Catholic historians today is in many ways a consequence of the destruction of this interpretive framework by developments in late-medieval Catholic and early-modern Protestant biblical exegesis. The secular historian David Harlan has made this connection in a way that should give pause to any Catholic who thinks that it is sufficient simply to connect this empiricism to the truths of the Catholic faith. In an essay published in the *American Historical Review* during the late 1980s, in the heat of epistemological debates over postmodernism and the linguistic turn, Harlan identifies the various attempts to hold on to some notion of a direct encounter with the past through the accumulation of verifiable facts and causal relations as “essentially a Protestant proposal.” According to Harlan, these historians are trying to do to the past what Luther did to the Bible:

Like Luther, they argue that historical texts convey fixed meanings and that those meanings are accessible and ultimately determinable, if the critics or historians only cut through the layers of interpretation that stand between the naked text and their inquiring minds. Like Luther, they look on these layers of accumulated interpretation as an impediment, an obstruction, an obstacle, barring historians from the “primary intentions” of the author. The wealth of interpretive material that surrounds a historical work they regard as so much scale-like incrustation that historians must smash to pieces with their “truly historical method” in order to get at the pearl of authentic meaning, what the author “really meant,” what the text “really says.”<sup>15</sup>

Harlan writes as a scholar who is deeply committed to the practice of history writing as it developed in the twentieth century, yet one who rejects both the naïve epistemology of modernism and the noxious moral nihilism of postmodernism. In identifying Protestantism as the root of the problem, he points to “the Rabbinic and the Catholic interpretive traditions” as the start of a solution.<sup>16</sup> Still, Harlan fails to follow through

on the initial promise of his diagnosis. He refuses to engage specific Catholic interpretive models, and even the Jewish models that at least receive some serious consideration fall short of Harlan's true guiding light, the pragmatist philosopher Richard Rorty.

Harlan's wrong conclusion should not lead us to discount his correct premise. Catholics should feel confident that in trying to develop a Catholic view of history, they are not simply trying to return history to the truth of tradition but are also, in fact, on the cutting edge of intellectual life outside the Church as well. Developing a Catholic view of history may thus enable us not only to shore up our own intellectual traditions, but also to evangelize the intellectual leaders of the culture of death. In many ways, secular thinkers have already done much of the critical work themselves: modernity has self-deconstructed into postmodern nihilism. Nietzsche is the natural end-point of the trajectory of modern philosophy. Few moderns or postmodernists will endorse nihilism across the board. Some continue to affirm the high ideals of earlier generations of secular humanists, even as these ideals have revealed themselves to be little more than emotive wishes. No modern system of thought has proved capable of escaping the solipsistic nihilism of the Cartesian subject. In my two books, *Conspicuous Criticism* and *A World Made Safe for Differences*, I have argued that the most powerful secular alternative to this nihilism in the twentieth century—the idea that people are bound together by a culture, a whole way of life, a pattern of values that unites people into an organic unity—proved to be nothing more than a re-writing of the old seventeenth-century economic individualism that produced this nihilism in the first place.<sup>17</sup> My own work owes a great debt to previous critics of modernity, secular and Catholic alike, particularly the work of Alasdair MacIntyre.<sup>18</sup> The time for critique is over. We need to develop a positive alternative.

In the field of history, Catholics have tremendous resources to draw upon within the tradition itself. We have lost much of the analogical imagination that used to inform historical and literary interpretation, but we do have an interpretive framework that can best speak to our own time while bringing us back to the tradition. This framework found its clearest expression in Augustine's *City of God*. Augustine views human history as a ceaseless dialectic between the City of God (the Church) and the City of Man (the anti-Christ). Lest this appear too simplistic or black and white, we should note that while Augustine insists on the stark opposition of these two categories as ideal types (if you will), he also insists that in reality the two cities are inextricably bound, at times mixed beyond our ability to distinguish.<sup>19</sup> The Church is made up of saints and sinners, and no one can reliably

infer from looking around at Mass on Sunday who will go to heaven and who will go to hell. Far from an exercise in simple piety, the idea of Catholic history as the search for the City of God in history presents a challenge of historical detection beyond anything the secular world could image.

Such a history presents certain moral challenges to be sure. Who are we, after all, to judge the souls of past historical actors? It poses certain analytic challenges as well: At what point do we stop trying to sort out the two cities? At what point might our inquiry degenerate into mere curiosity or brain-teasing problem solving? These challenges, however, are inherent in the enterprise of historical inquiry, Catholic or secular. So much modern history writing has been nothing other than a search for a secular substitute for the City of God. Secular historians have simply traded the dialectic of the City of God and the City of Man for that of freedom vs. necessity, with freedom defined in modern Enlightenment terms as autonomy, the independence from all externally imposed limiting or defining structures, material or cultural. The modern period has many inspiring tales of triumph to tell, but even stories of failure may confirm autonomy as a value. Historians of the medieval period may acknowledge the marginality of autonomy to the culture of medieval Europe, but then that very marginality becomes the focus of their study. In many ways, the *locus classicus* for this kind of study has been the story of the rising middle class, generally told through developments in commerce, artistic innovation, or theological heresy. The more recent variations on this story include the search for the first socialist, the first feminist, the first critical race theorist, or the first libidinal anarchist.

In their piety, these “histories” are more than a match for the old chronicles and hagiographies. In their willingness to bend facts to their purposes, they often betray their own professed fidelity to evidence. The examples are legion. I will take one from a popular, though perhaps now dated, monograph I feel to be representative of the empirical limitations of the quest for historical agency. The text is Kathy Peiss' *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York*. With a triumphalism that would put a 19th century evangelical to shame, Peiss celebrates the opportunities for the emancipation of women from traditional constraints offered by the popular amusements of the Gilded Age/Progressive Era American city. To take but one example, consider Peiss' interpretation of the “tough girls” subculture of turn-of-the-century New York. Peiss cites a New York vice investigator's account of an incident involving one such girl, an Italian immigrant:

The girl had no hat on and had probably just left her house to go on an errand when she met this man [...] I heard her say, my mother will think I got lost. I was supposed to go to the drug store she wouldn't know what became of me. The man was under the influence of liquor and was trying to put his hands under her skirts, she resisted at first but afterwards let him go as far as he liked.<sup>20</sup>

Peiss' interpretation: "Although the investigator does not describe this incident and its participants in great detail, the vignette suggests the powerful allure of leisure as a realm of assertion, sexual experimentation, and escape from parental demands."<sup>21</sup> In the context of a book full of such examples, "suggests" becomes a synonym for "proves." The facts of the above incident could just as easily suggest/prove the existence of a culture of rape; or, perhaps they signal the triumph of the cultural hegemony of a libidinal anarchy that forces women into sexual experimentation they would not otherwise choose for themselves. None of these interpretations flows inevitably from the facts; all reflect the moral, ideological and spiritual commitments that the historian brings to the facts.<sup>22</sup> Inferring agency from action is about as empirically valid as claiming that the Holy Spirit caused the Great Awakening.

Peiss' sexually-adventurous immigrant women may seem a long way from the kind of questions that concern historians of religion, but her quest for agency has deeply religious historical roots. It is in many ways a modern secular equivalent of the old Puritan quest for the certainty of salvation. The question "Are you really saved?" becomes "Are you really a historical agent?" Individual diary-keeping and the rigorous, direct scrutiny of pastors could not answer the former question for Puritans in their own time; there is no reason to think that this question will be any more answerable with our vaunted historical distance. Psychohistory has a fairly low standing in a profession that prides itself on non-theoretical empiricism, but the quest for historical "experience"—an inherently subjective phenomenon—makes all history into a kind of psychohistory.

Secular historians do not direct themselves to the study of human agency because it is that about which the sources allow them to speak. They do so because it is a deeply held value that defines them as middle-class professionals. History monographs are not proofs of fact; they are reflections on value. I suppose I cannot really object to Peiss' use of her evidence to advance her agenda of sexual liberation; the Church fathers certainly made greater interpretive leaps with their

imaginative allegorizing. What I can object to, however, is Peiss' refusal to argue for the position she asserts: She simply assumes the progress of sexual liberation to be in the natural course of human events. Peiss intends the sheer accumulation of instances of such liberation to do the work of moral argumentation and presents these instances as facts that almost speak for themselves.

Peiss' work is instructive not simply as a symptom of secular moral vacuity, but also as a challenge to Catholic historians to reclaim areas of history too easily consigned to secular historians. Conservative historians, Catholic and secular alike, routinely complain that social histories such as Peiss' neglect "real" history—that is, political and military history—for minor events of concern only to special interests. Augustine's *City of God* not only offers a distinctly Christian dynamic and framework for history in general, but it also guides us to look for that dynamic in the most unlikely of places. Augustine's great work was of course inspired by the most catastrophic military-political event of late antiquity: the sack of Rome by the forces of Alaric the Visigoth in 410. Still, the first book of *City of God* devotes just as much space to the morality of virgin suicides as it does to absolving Christians from guilt for the sack. What for a modern, secular guns-and-boots historian would be an insignificant detail becomes for Augustine a major ethical dilemma, largely because in the grand scheme of things the eternal fate of the soul of a Christian woman is ultimately more important than the temporal fate of an earthly city. Real Catholic history must embrace all of life, from the rise and fall of empires to the salvation and damnation of individual souls.

At the same time, we need to show restraint, or at least discernment. As Catholics, we are called to "restore all things in Christ;" but as Catholic historians, we need not feel compelled to restore all things in Catholic history. The modern imperative to translate all empirical reality into some form of scholarship poses a threat to true Catholic history totally apart from the frameworks—secular or Catholic—that inform such scholarship. The imperative is itself a legacy of the Enlightenment effort to rationalize every aspect of life and carries with it the seeds of secularization, whatever the stated motives of its Christian defenders. The history I have reviewed here bears this out. Catholic historians of the first half of the twentieth century sought to use modern "scientific" techniques to bolster the faith; historians of the second half of the century used these techniques to undermine the faith. Central to this scientific ethos is the need for constant revision. Even if this suggests a turning of scholarship back to a more positive treatment of the Church in history—something we have seen in the work of Eamon

Duffy, for example—the truths at stake are too important to subject to the cycles of revision.<sup>23</sup> A look over the last hundred years or so of scholarship in any field of history shows a fairly clear recycling of a few explanatory frameworks and emotive moral affirmations; for all but the willfully naïve, the noble dream of progress in historical interpretation has proved just as illusory as the dream of objectivity. Catholics wishing to reclaim history for the Church need to do something other than match their secular opponents monograph for monograph.

What then, should be done? I can at best sketch only an outline. I am fairly confident, however, that the restoration of Catholic history must begin with reading, rather than writing—and not simply reading orthodox Catholic history, but also the best of the secular monographic tradition of the past hundred years. Catholic intellectuals cannot responsibly integrate history back into a theological framework without going through the tradition of the monograph. In many ways, this tradition presents us with a challenge similar to that posed by the revival of Aristotle in the 12th and 13th centuries.<sup>24</sup> Catholics had much to fear from Aristotelian rationalism; Thomas Aquinas ultimately demonstrated that Catholics also had much to learn from it. Catholics who engage the monographic tradition of academic history must detach the monographs from their social scientific roots and return them to a philosophical setting where they can be read for what they really are: less accounts of fact than reflections on value.

The Spirit works in mysterious ways. God can bring good out of evil. Modern history writing arose as an attempt to explain the rise of the modern world: the transition from the organic, hierarchical relations of the medieval *Gemeinschaft*, to the mechanical, egalitarian relations of modern *Gesellschaft*.<sup>25</sup> The historical profession has a moral and intellectual investment in *Gesellschaft*. It has also nurtured a small but vocal cohort of *Gemeinschaft* grouchers (I count myself among them). The evidence that professional historians have mustered to justify the march of progress has just as often been served as ammunition in the battle against modernity: One man's oppression is another man's community, one man's superstition is another man's spirituality. Judgments about these facts are indeed arbitrary apart from any authoritative interpretive tradition. Most Christians claim allegiance to some such tradition and should let their tradition guide them in their judgments about the past. In the process of pronouncing its death sentence on the past, modernity has given us a window on the world we have lost. The history monograph, a literary genre with no real roots in the Christian intellectual tradition, is that window.

If Augustine could Christianize Plato, then Christian historians today can Christianize the monograph. We can only succeed in this task if we make our faith tradition, rather than the secular historical profession, the authoritative guide to our reading of monographs. In a sense, we should read the best of the monographic literature of the last hundred years the way Jefferson read the Bible: We need to separate out the magical, miraculous elements (causality, agency) and concentrate on the ethical, philosophical content (the information, the thick description of the world we have lost and the world we have found). Texts would be studied and taught not as more or less accurate accounts of particular historical periods, but as more or less true arguments illuminating aspects of Christian social philosophy.

Here again, we need restraint. The shift from original research to a kind of philosophical historiography will amount to nothing if guided by the production quotas of the modern professional monograph machine. I would love to see a book-length treatment of the history of sexuality in light of John Paul II's theology of the body; I would hate to see many such books. As Catholic historians, we need a guild that, like the guilds of old, has the authority not only to ensure quality but also to limit production. The apostles of modernity swept away such restraints in the name of the free market. Free speech is the intellectual equivalent of the free market in material goods; it is no wonder that modern intellectual life reflects the ethos of our consumer society. The creation of an alternative intellectual economy—or better, ecology—of reading and writing poses the greatest challenge to contemporary Catholic historical practice. In some sense, the intellectual leap from Marx or Adam Smith to Augustine is much easier than the social and institutional shift from modern academic to medieval scribe, but such a shift must be made if we are to arrive at a truly Catholic approach to history.

## Notes

1. For the most complete overview of the development of historical thinking and writing in its modern professional context, see Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

2. *Ibid.*, 46.

3. For the best brief account of this Catholic moment, see "On Top of the World," chapter 8 in Charles R. Morris, *American Catholic: The Saints and Sinners Who Built America's Most Powerful Church* (New York, 1997).

4. John Tracy Ellis, "American Catholics and the Intellectual Life," *Thought*, Autumn 1955, 353-86.

5. For representative writings of these two historians, see: Jay Dolan, *The American Catholic Experience: A History from Colonial Times to Present* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1985); John T. McGreevy, *Catholicism and American Freedom: A History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004).

6. Quoted in Philip Gleason, "History, Historical Consciousness, and Present-Mindedness," in Gleason's *Keeping the Faith: American Catholicism Past and Present* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987), 207.

7. *Ibid.*

8. John T. McGreevy, *Parish Boundaries: The Catholic Encounter with Race in the Twentieth Century Urban North* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

9. Gleason, *Ibid.*, especially the section "A Methodological Confession of Faith," 216-225.

10. *Ibid.*

11. *Ibid.*

12. Plutarch, *Plutarch's Lives* (New York: Random House, 2001), 201.
13. Peter Harrison, *The Bible, Protestantism, and the Rise of Natural Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 123, 31.
14. *Ibid.*, 30.
15. David Harlan, "Intellectual History and the Return of Literature," *American Historical Review* 94 (June 1989): 600.
16. *Ibid.*
17. See Christopher Shannon, *Conspicuous Criticism: Tradition, the Individual, and Culture in Modern American Social Thought* (Scranton: University of Scranton Press, 2006 [1996]). Christopher Shannon, *A World Made Safe for Differences: Cold War Intellectuals and the Politics of Identity* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2001).
18. For the best short account of MacIntyre's conception of tradition as it relates to intellectual inquiry, see Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopedia, Genealogy, and Tradition* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990).
19. See in general, St. Augustine, *City of God* (New York: Penguin, 2003).
20. Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987): 71.
21. *Ibid.*
22. When not feeling under siege from Christians or deconstructionists, mainstream historians freely acknowledge this reality of professional practice. In an edited volume intended to introduce students to the kind of historiographical debates that animate the profession, Francis Couvares quite straightforwardly acknowledges that in the historical debate over U.S. foreign policy, the scholarly distinction between "is" and "ought" simply disappears: "Just as Americans debated the wisdom of particular policies, so historians disagreed about interpretations of past events. The historical debate, in reality, was not confined simply to

an analysis of the past; implicit in each interpretation of diplomatic history was a vision of what America ought to be.” Francis G. Couvares, *Interpretations of American History: Patterns and Perspectives. Vol. 2: From Reconstruction* (New York: The Free Press, 2000), 102.

23. See Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England 1400-1580* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

24. On this issue, see MacIntyre, *Ibid.*, especially chapters 5 and 6.

25. For an account of the centrality of this narrative to history writing, see Thomas Bender, *Community and Social Change* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978).