It does not take long, reading in Catholic periodicals of the 1920s, to notice that issues concerning schooling were among the most common topics of discussion. Specifically, Catholics debated—argued against, for the most part—the expansion of federal aid and control in the educational sphere. The names of congressional bills—Smith-Towner, Sterling-Towner, Curtis-Reed—litter the landscape of Catholic journals and present a formidable challenge to the scholar trying to sort it all out.

Douglas Slawson has therefore rendered a considerable service by organizing the campaign for a federal department of education into a coherent story. He has done so by focusing on the two main antagonists in the ensuing battle; namely, a coalition of public education supporters on one side and Roman Catholics on the other.

Slawson’s story begins in 1918, with the push for nationalization that attended World War I sweeping the country. The educational establishment, led by the National Education Association (NEA) sought an instrument for the strengthening and coordination of public schools, and viewed a federal department of education as the means to that end. The NEA wanted the new department to fund, collect, and disseminate education research and to provide additional monetary aid to schools, either directly or through the states.

Catholics at once perceived a threat to their large and growing school system, built with much sacrifice over the preceding decades. The protests of supporters notwithstanding, Catholics believed that with federal aid would come federal control. Centralization of functions at the national level might well mean declining toleration for educational diversity, including parochial religious schools.

The defensiveness of Catholics on the issue was justified by the character of the supporters that coalesced around the proposal for a federal department. Besides the NEA, the Southern Jurisdiction of Scottish Rite Masonry and the Ku Klux Klan also provided vocal support for the idea. Slawson carefully sorts out the relationships among these groups, as well as their motives, and never succumbs to the distortions of sensationalism or guilt-by-association. He nonetheless shows irrefutably that anti-Catholicism played a vital role in stoking a large part of the campaign’s support, and that, more specifically, many
in the coalition explicitly aimed to destroy the Catholic school system in the United States.

Thus the story continues over the course of the next fifteen years, with charges hurled back and forth between the opposing camps and the battle lines remaining substantially the same, albeit with some shifting of positions. Slawson details each legislative initiative, the machinations of its proponents and opponents in the corridors of politics, as well as the public debate between the two sides in the pages of the nation’s Catholic and secular presses. He perceptively observes that Catholics in this period, far from being anomalous in their opposition to centralization, shared in widespread American distrust of federal control over education.

In the process, Slawson brings to light a number of intriguing points. For one, he places the National Catholic Welfare Conference (NCWC) in its rightful place at the center of the legislative skirmishes. Yet he notes forthrightly that the NCWC’s role in the debate was an ironic one. NCWC staff such as Father John J. Burke leaned heavily on the argument that centralization of education in the federal government was dangerous because it would necessarily lead to bureaucracy, inefficiency, and a socialistic mentality. But the NCWC itself was formed as part of the nationalizing trend of the Great War, and represented the bureaucratization of the Church in America. It was a point not lost on the NCWC’s critics, who voiced their concerns loudly in 1926 when the NCWC staff endorsed a compromise bill that conceded some ground to the pro-department lobby (170–172).

The display of such internal strife among Catholics is the second interesting dimension of Slawson’s narrative. Though Catholics generally lined up on one side of the larger debate and though significant commonality characterized Catholic educators, editors, and intellectuals, it is still true that there were significant areas of disagreement among Catholic figures. Many Catholics were absolute and intransigent with respect to federal involvement: none could be permitted. Others, including prominent educators such as Monsignor Edward Pace and the NCWC’s Burke, were open to some measure of participation by the national government. Lively debates aired not only between Catholics and the NEA, then, but also among Catholics.

In one instance only does Slawson’s judgment seem mistaken. In the dispute within the Catholic community over whether or not to support the compromise bill mentioned above (the “Phipps bill”), Slawson dismisses the concerns of opponents such as America editor Wilfrid Parsons, claiming that the measure was “hardly the entering wedge for the creeping federalism feared by [its opponents]” (178). But
Slawson had already presented ample evidence that any movement toward federal control or funding was indeed viewed by the NEA and its allies as simply one step toward extensive nationalization of education. In short, the various groups of both supporters and detractors viewed the various legislative proposals in various ways (a complexity Slawson skillfully captures). The position of those absolutely opposed to federal involvement was at least reasonable, then, in light of the stated aims of the pro-department lobby. With the benefit of hindsight, indeed, one might argue that Parsons' opposition was prescient.

Slawson's research is thorough and his writing excellent. The subject matter, moreover, possesses some of its own drama. The book is, nonetheless, largely a record of legislative and editorial activity and cannot be characterized as a page-turner. Its sometimes-heavy pace is compounded by some redundancy, such as repeated explanations of the rationale of the two sides, which could in some cases be omitted.

The book is nonetheless a solid scholarly treatment of an important and revealing period in the history of Catholic interaction with American culture and politics. For this reason and others aforementioned, it deserves wide attention.

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