This is a very provocative essay. While it is instructive to stimulate a more thoughtful reading of the results of research and to challenge an embedded historiographical status quo that can become unexamined and habitual, and not very thoughtful—historians of course are not alone in the scholarly hesitancy toward self-reflection as to their methodological and philosophical presuppositions—it is another matter to challenge Catholic historians to assume the role of scholarly “reactionaries,” as called for by the author. Once again, for at least some bystanders, art would be in the way of imitating life: more than a few more progressive academics already consider Catholic scholars a bit beyond the circle of the conventional scholarly fire and Catholic scholar itself an oxymoron. One would seem to need to be prudent in gratifying these contemporary prejudices already in place against those, Catholics, who are judged to be unable to approach existential reality in an open-minded and necessarily skeptical frame of mind. And why quibble about the matter? Such campus suspiciousness of the presence of Catholicism allows for no real distinction between the authoritarian and the authoritative as the distinction advocated by Catholics sensitive to such criticism. The path of the “reactionary” here is slippery, if not downright dangerous.

The essay argues that Catholic historians (and Catholic historiography) have sold out as it were to the contemporary academic marketplace or public square. Like their non-Catholic peers, Catholic historians, whatever their actual area of interest, practice a “common-sense empirical” methodology rather than doing their history and research from within the tradition which the author approves: a) “historical inquiry as a means of reflecting on God’s providential plan for man living in time;” and b) this retrieval as part of an effort by “Catholic intellectuals” to “integrate history back into a theological framework.” A specific suggestion in the essay encourages the prospect of historical inquiry and integration to be accomplished through the prism of St. Augustine’s City of God. This horizon for understanding history would evidently include an assimilation of the historicity of the Gospel: the Incarnation and redemptive action of Christ, the Sermon on the Mount, the establishment of an authoritative Church, the action of the Holy Spirit in history, the priority of the theological virtues, and self-sacrifice, for example. This would be in opposition to the contemporary [post-Fall!] infatuation with personal and moral self-autonomy. The
author is clear: “History monographs are not proofs of fact; they are reflections on value.” And, further: “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.” What is “reactionary” in the author’s historiographical manifesto is his call for a “shift from original research to a kind of philosophical historiography.” He would have Catholic historians divert much of their attention from writing even more monographs to reacting more directly and emphatically to modern scholarship through a more traditional lens: “We can only succeed in this task [of historical renovation or restoration] if we make our faith tradition, rather than the secular historical profession, the authoritative guide to our reading of monographs.” Or, to put it in an even more countercultural way: he is calling for a transformation of the contemporary Catholic historian “from modern academic to medieval scribe” if we are to regain “a truly Catholic approach to history.”

Well, to be a “reactionary”: Anything that would cut down on the number of monographs on, let us say, subjects of peripheral interest, would be welcome! The danger though is recognized by the author himself, even as he calls for such self-control: “Real Catholic history must embrace all [italics added] of life, from the rise and fall of empires to the salvation and damnation of individual souls.” In small forgotten things we can sometimes discover more than we might expect! Additional (or even renewed, or even any) attention to theology and philosophy in graduate programs in history in Catholic universities [and even in undergraduate curriculums] might be helpful in encouraging students (as well as we former students!) to learn the “language” available to a historiography that would recognize both Providence in history and values that are anterior to the self. Prudence and charity, however, would probably dictate the formulation (or reformulation) of an academic lingua franca accessible to the “outsider”: cf., in American history, the resuscitation of the natural law tradition. Unless the restoration of a Catholic historiography is intended to be some sort of gnosis exercise, it must be possible for the “uninitiated” to participate, or at least to communicate. In addition, the initiative’s “reactionary” entrada can make its appearance in book or monograph reviewing. Pointed and respectful commentary informed by a more traditional perspective can be employed, perhaps to some good effect. [A modest example might be found in the extended review of Jay Dolan, In Search of an American Catholicism: A History of Religion and Culture in Tension (Oxford, 2002) in The Catholic Historical Review LXXXIX
(October 2003, 807-812) which works hard with the idea of incul
turation and the distinction between, and interaction of, Gospel
culture and a host culture.] Also, there is surely something to be
gained from historiographical essays on contemporary history,
Catholic subject and non-Catholic subject, from this more
traditional perspective.

In a post-modern and post-Enlightenment (academic) world,
with no “privileged” metanarrative or historiographical horizon
(although quite obviously certain views and values, such as self-
autonomy, are in fact implicitly championed), it is surely
acceptable to bring forward the “reactionary” Catholic historical
perspective. It does carry heavy baggage given its rather
countercultural (but charitable and humble) face “backwards”
toward an authoritative order seemingly tossed aside long ago in
man’s ascent to self-fulfillment. And its practitioners are at
work here and there. More to the point, however, and in itself
sure to carry some éclat in a culture ostensibly ever-open to the
new and unique, is the fact that this forgotten “old way” is always
radical and new and liberating in the truest sense.