Would It Still be History?

In “A Catholic Approach to History,” Christopher Shannon offers readers an essay with many insights along with some frustratingly vague passages. Overall, this is a bracing and provocative article which will be of interest to Catholic historians, theologians and philosophers alike.

Shannon is not at all pleased with the state of the historical profession. He asserts that the purpose of historical inquiry is to “reflect on God’s providential plan for man living in time.” Yet he doubts that most Catholic historians would describe their task in those terms. Instead, they see themselves as social scientists who are trying to revise and refine the scholarship in their rather narrow area of expertise.

Shannon does not think this is a new problem by any means. He uses American Catholic historians to highlight the difficulties that have long plagued the profession. He notes that the American Catholic Historical Association (ACHA), which was established in 1919, never made any effort to articulate a distinctively Catholic approach to history. ACHA members accepted the methods of the secular American Historical Association and simply wanted more attention and sympathy given to Catholic topics.

Shannon rightly notes the importance of John Tracy Ellis’s 1955 essay on anti-intellectualism among American Catholics. Ellis’s criticisms of Catholic scholarship led many Catholic academics to mimic their Ivy League counterparts even more closely in hopes of gaining their approbation. After Ellis, Shannon sees things going from bad to worse. The leading post-Vatican II historians have used scientific techniques “to undermine the faith.” He dismisses the work of the liberal Americanist Jay Dolan and then, to my surprise, sharply criticizes John McGreevy’s Catholicism and American Freedom. Describing McGreevy’s book—which was meticulously researched—as being mostly a “re-hashing” of Dolan’s work, he then takes McGreevy to task for his “silence” on abortion. In fact, McGreevy expressed sympathy for the pro-life movement and criticized Mario Cuomo and the Democratic Party for their positions. He noted that the Democrats refuse to condemn partial-birth abortions or even sex-selection abortions.1

While McGreevy and other Catholic historians have been laboring to produce carefully footnoted, objective scholarship, Shannon
wryly points out that many secular historians—whether feminists, Marxists, or multiculturalists—have no such scruples. They have no qualms about producing what Shannon terms “hagiographies” celebrating their subjects’ efforts to emancipate women, blacks, homosexuals, etc.

While I found much to agree with in Shannon’s critique of the historical profession, I was not clear about how he would remedy the situation. He speaks of the need for a framework to guide Catholic historians and believes that St. Augustine’s City of God provides a model. Perhaps, but I would like to see this claim spelled out. I am not sure how Catholic historians are to go about their “search for the City of God in history.” (p.14)

I wonder if Shannon thinks that there are other scholars that can help to provide an interpretive framework for Catholic historians. What about Christopher Dawson? A prolific scholar, Dawson adhered to rigorous standards of scholarship and at the same time wrote from a professedly Catholic standpoint. In his books and essays, Dawson provided an excellent overview of world history from the time of Christ up till the twentieth century and demonstrated the centrality of religion in virtually every society. In his work on the modern era, he argued that secular religions such as Marxism and Nazism have tried to fill the void left by the decline of Christianity.2

Shannon concludes with an exhortation to Catholic scholars to read more. And they should not limit themselves to orthodox Catholic works, “but also the best of the secular monograph tradition of the last hundred years.” (p.19) This sounds good, but I would have wanted some specifics. Are there certain key works that we all must read or re-read? How do we know which works belong to this canon?

In the end, I am not sure that Shannon’s vision of Catholic history still amounts to history. His focus is very much on the manifestations of sin and grace and virtue and vice in history. Therefore, I am inclined to think that his Catholic history might be better labeled “historical theology.” Still, cautious historian that I am, I will need to amass more evidence before I can make any definite judgments on his approach. I hope he will follow up this thought-provoking and challenging essay with a sequel!
Notes
