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Christopher Shannon’s essay does for the Catholic historian what Keith Windshuttle’s 1996 polemic *The Killing of History* attempted for historians in general; that is, call historians back from the precipice of postmodernism. As Shannon and Windshuttle note, the professional discipline of history has undergone a profound intellectual crisis in the twentieth century and has lost much of its coherence. Whereas Windshuttle presented a utilitarian defense of the historical method that called historians back to Enlightenment rationalism, Shannon’s essay offers important reflections and prescriptions for Catholic historians to reconnect them to the Catholic intellectual tradition.¹

The historian’s task is a difficult one. He aims first to reconstruct the past using sound methods and an incomplete and limited source record and then to explicate the broader meaning of the past. The practice of history requires a philosophical backdrop and a particular view of human nature, but many, if not most, professional historians rarely articulate the philosophy that informs their works. Because of their assumptions, historians have been easy targets for postmodernist critics who undermine the epistemological realism most historians instinctively practice. The result has been the “killing of history,” in Windshuttle’s phrase. Once intelligible, the past now has become a place of oppressive power relationships and shifting human identities based on endless arrangements—“constructions”—of postmodernism’s unholy trinity: race, class, and gender. Employing the tools of skepticism and relativism and positing that humans have no set nature, postmodernists have claimed that history is no more than a fable and reality is unknowable. These are, however, philosophical assumptions, not “historical truths.” The past itself has not changed, only the philosophical assumptions of historians.² The crisis in modern history, as Shannon implies, is a philosophical one.

Postmodernists have attacked historical methodology as well. The strongest point they have made is that culture influences the point of view of both the historical sources and the historian himself in a myriad of complex ways. Historical knowledge, therefore, is hopelessly incomplete and tainted by inaccuracies. St. Augustine framed a similar point in a different way. Because human beings are not omniscient, the past will remain fully known to God alone. Human beings can understand only glimpses of the past and can comprehend only part of the experiences of individuals. The wellspring of human motivation, what transpires between the individual soul and God, cannot be captured and studied by the historian.
The difference between a postmodernist and an Augustinian is that the Augustinian believes in a fixed human nature. Whereas historical persons might have attempted to deceive in the writings they left behind, the historian, through empathy, can make plausible attempts to account for human weaknesses and uncover past human motivations. Having discarded the assumption of a common human nature, the postmodernist is left looking for human agency in the only area now shared by humans, the actions of individuals.

Shannon destroys the postmodernist approach when discussing Kathy Peiss’ book, which asserts that there was a culture of sexual experimentation in turn-of-the-century New York on the basis of an incident in which a young lady succumbed to a man’s attempt to grope her on the street. “Inferring agency from action” is problematic, Shannon tells us, because interpreting the facts presupposes philosophical assumptions that may not be accurate. Many historians would agree that Peiss’ method is flawed and limits the sources to say what she wants them to say. A logical historical methodology that recognizes the complexity of discerning human motivation can correct Peiss’ error. But Shannon is right to point out that interpretation presupposes an intellectual tradition or philosophy.

Shannon furthers his critique through examining interpretative frameworks historians use. Historians judge the meanings of past actions and in this task employ philosophical assumptions that lie outside of the historical narrative. Faith in the idea of progress, the mainstay of what Herbert Butterfield termed the “whig interpretation of history,” is the most conspicuous example of this in American historiography. Shannon puts it well: “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.” The problem of interpretation is linked to the postmodernists’ stress on the cultural influences on human action and ideas. The historian, like all people, is limited by his own experience, knowledge of the world, imagination, and culture. Shannon indicates that the Catholic historian might employ a unique framework. Here he examines the work of John McGreevy.

John McGreevy’s *Catholicism and American Freedom* synthesized scholarship on American Catholic history to reveal the interplay between Catholicism and American notions of individual autonomy from the 1830s to the present. Shannon criticizes McGreevy for not using a Catholic sensibility and moral ethic to address more directly in his scholarship the evil of abortion in American society.
Shannon is too harsh on McGreevy. McGreevy’s book illustrates well Shannon’s point about interpretative framework. The very question of the compatibility of Catholicism and American freedom, narrowly defined as autonomous individualism, is an old question that both Catholics and their evangelical Protestant opponents asked during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. American secularists, as McGreevy detailed in his book, also engaged the issue periodically. Interestingly, very few secular scholars have investigated deeply the compatibility question. They probably display as little interest and see as little significance to the question as I would to the issue of the compatibility of Mormonism and American freedom. McGreevy’s Catholicism displays itself in both the subject he chose to study and the specific questions he asked of the past.

The critique of McGreevy produces a dilemma. Shannon rightly demonstrates that the historian’s task is intimately wrapped up in philosophical assumptions. Philosophy, however, especially when it depends on observed past human experience to make claims, also relies upon history. But philosophy and history are distinguishable from one another. Philosophy is the love of wisdom and the search for truth about reality. History attempts to recreate the past to understand both what happened and the effects of past human actions on the world. Both philosophy and history lean on one another but are not identical or interchangeable. Shannon seems to identify philosophy and history too closely. He wants the Catholic historian to look at the past through specific moral and theological lenses and thus severely limit the history produced. But in reviving Augustinian providential history, Shannon fails to answer the argument against this approach leveled in Early Modern Europe. As Mark Gilderhus puts it, “As historians realized, it was one thing to say with conviction that God acted in history and quite another to determine with any precision just where and when.”5 The discipline of history became more secular when historians realized that historical methods were unable to reveal the mind of God. In other words, historians realized that history, philosophy, and theology were not identical.

Where does this leave the Catholic historian? Catholics often will have a different set of questions about the past than will secularists because their intellectual world and culture shape them in different ways. For this reason, they will produce different histories, proving the old dictum, “Ask a different question, get a different answer.” A revival of Catholic history depends upon the revival of Catholic culture in general. Future Catholic historians must be trained in the intellectual traditions of the Faith if they are to ask specifically Catholic questions about the past.
Without a vibrant Catholic culture to inform their worldview, future Catholic historians would differ little from their secular counterparts. It is no wonder then, in this age of extreme crisis within the Church, that Shannon finds Catholic history lacking.

Several of Shannon’s practical suggestions are problematic. In his discussion of the “monographic tradition,” Shannon indicates that Catholic scholars should read monographs for “what they really are: less accounts of fact than reflections on value.” This puzzles me, for every graduate history student, regardless of ideological or religious leanings, learns this process when studying historiography. Most graduate programs assign monographs not to convey factual information, but to explain different schools of historical interpretation. The process Shannon encourages is already in place. I would also question Shannon’s advice to limit production of historical works. If the state of Catholic history is as bad as Shannon claims it is (and I do not doubt him), then it would seem logical that Catholics would desire an explosion of scholarship asking specifically Catholic questions about the past. In this way, Catholic historians would create a large historical literature that fleshes out misunderstood, underrepresented, or ignored parts of the past. This, in turn, would enrich the historical profession in general.

Shannon needs to explicate further his contention that Catholic history “requires moral judgment in the selection of topics and in the focus of study within each topic.” Both the selection of a historical topic of inquiry and the methodology used depend on the questions asked of the past. I am not certain of the moral component of this task. To explain something is not to excuse it. A historian studying American slavery or the Holocaust is not excusing the existence of those great evils. In an age of globalization in which Christianity has spread throughout the world, Catholic historians, even if they confined themselves to studying past Catholics, would have a wide variety of cultures and topics to explore. Also, as the great Catholic historian Christopher Dawson argued in *The Crisis of Western Education*, “Christian education should be wider, not narrower, than that of the secular school.” Catholicism, far from limiting inquiry to a few questions, broadens it. Catholic history is inclusive in the best sense. It studies all that has been redeemed by Christ; that is, humanity itself. Shannon affirms this point, but then charges that “the truths at stake are too important to subject to the cycles of revision.”

The Catholic historian is left wondering just what he is supposed to study. Shannon advises that Catholic historians should read “the best of the monographic literature of the last hundred years” for its “ethical, philosophical content.” “Texts,” he tells us, “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.” So in the end, Shannon has the Catholic historian becoming a Catholic philosopher.

Just as Windshuttle’s *The Killing of History* launched a much needed debate on the place of history within the Academy, Christopher Shannon’s critique can prompt a productive discussion on the discipline of history within the Catholic intellectual tradition. Shannon could improve his argument in two ways. First, he should provide a definition of history and explain how it differs from philosophy and theology. Second, he should expound on the practical suggestions he has for Catholic historians. With good discussion and vigorous debate, faithful Catholic historians could place themselves, as he suggests, on the cutting edge of intellectual life within the Church. History, after all, has much to tell us.
Notes


