

# Faith and the Historian: Catholic Perspectives

## Introduction

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In March 2001, a small group of historians of American life gathered at Cornell University to share their thinking on how an experience with Catholicism had affected their approach to history<sup>1</sup>. Not all the participants were practicing Catholics, but all who gave papers, whatever their current beliefs, were born into Catholic families and thus had been "touched by Catholicism" in a serious manner. How, we collectively wondered, had that experience influenced our historical work?

The origins of this conference lay in the occasional discussions between the two co-organizers, Steve Rosswurm of Lake Forest College and me, that began in the late 1990s. While I worked on an article about Herbert Gutman's influence on writing the history of American working people (which included a discussion of religion), the biographer in me wondered about how familial values may have framed Gutman's historical thinking, and that of other historians too. This had interested me for some time and, in the process of work for that article, I came across a pointed comment by John McGreevy that whetted my curiosity again. In the introduction to his first book, *Parish Boundaries*, McGreevy wrote that the "underlying argument" in discussions of class in contemporary historical writing generally assumed "that consciousness formed as a laborer is more important than consciousness developed in the home." I remain quite sympathetic to McGreevy's historiographical point, but it was another inference that touched a more personal vein. How did that "consciousness developed in the home"—varied as it may be—affect those of us who wrote history? That our historical sensibilities did not begin with that first graduate seminar was obvious, but how an experience with faith might have influenced my professional work remained more elusive. Discussions with Steve revealed a common interest, and thus emerged the idea for a conference and, ultimately, this volume<sup>2</sup>.

The focus on Catholicism was partly personal and partly professional. We were quite aware of other collections that gave historians the opportunity to publicly discuss the origins of their work. Although many of these collections emphasized intellectual influences and historiographical trends, there had been some discussion of religious influences as well<sup>3</sup>. Yet Catholicism, we felt, remained less explored, an oddity given the increasing numbers of professional historians from Catholic backgrounds in recent decades. It seemed a theme worth exploring beyond our private interests.

From the beginning, our efforts revolved around two central ideas. First, we purposely used the broad phrase "touched by Catholicism" to describe one prerequisite. With this wording, we indicated an interest in a wide variety of experiences, including "cradle-to-grave" Catholics,—those raised in that faith who later left (and in some cases even later returned); and converts to Catholicism (although none of the contributors were, in the final analysis, converts). The second guideline concerned the essays themselves. We were not looking for traditional historiographical pieces, important as their discussions can be; rather, we sought more personal essays and extended an invitation to historians to reflect on some of the deeper influences that framed their professional work. Thus, the prospectus, which was widely distributed over the Internet and by more traditional methods, said, in part, that we "wish to avoid the celebratory as well as the maudlin. We do not envision essays that are primarily expressions of faith (or the lack thereof); nor are we looking for essays that desire to 'settle scores/ be they old or new.

Rather, we seek essays by historians for whom Catholicism proved to be a formative experience and who are willing to explore in a public fashion this aspect (and perhaps others) of their lives as it has influenced their professional work." This invitation to move from the professional to the personal, and back again, proved unattractive to some, as they felt their historical work should stand on its own. While this was certainly a reasonable approach, others responded to the invitation with enthusiasm.

One consequence of this emphasis on a broad personal dimension was that we made a decision early that we would include only published historians. We did this not to ignore younger scholars; rather, the very nature of the essays—a dialogue between the private and the public, the personal and the professional—required it. In addition, a reader curious about themes raised in a particular essay could then have easy access to the author's published work. Unfortunately, this meant that a number of smart and interesting proposals were not accepted. Of the draft papers presented at the conference in 2001, six are included here. In addition, two pertinent essays, revised and expanded versions of previously published work by Anne Butler and Mario Garcia, have been included<sup>4</sup>.

The experience of twentieth-century Catholicism reflected in these essays is broad, although certainly not all-encompassing. The ages of the authors (birth dates range from 1927 to 1959) indicate that our experiences of adolescence, that critical time, included the Depression and war, the "prosperous" 1950s, and the "turbulent" 1960s and 1970s. Although these different American moments influenced us, equally important were the developments within Catholicism. Those born before 1950 grew to maturity within families deeply influenced by a church tradition that prized Catholic institutions, a strict moral theology, and, to varying degrees, looked askance at secular culture. These authors, whose cohort spans two generations, largely lived in a Catholic subculture, where priests were honored, religious sisters respected, and the authority of the Church itself questioned rarely. Although experienced differently (e.g., as a minority in a more rural and Protestant community, - in the emerging suburbs after

1945; in the urban, ethnic parish), this was a church culture that profoundly reflected, still, the "ultramontane" revival of the mid-nineteenth century<sup>5</sup>. As a number of the essays suggest, Vatican II and the social and political turmoil of the 1960s burst upon this world with stunning force. Spurred by changes in the larger society as well as from Pope John XXIII's *aggiornamento* (opening to the world), Catholicism and modernity once again engaged in what was, at first, a mood of hopeful expectations. For these essayists, already in their twenties or older when the transformations of the 1960s began, the impact varied greatly even if the "touch" of a traditional Catholicism remained deeply embedded<sup>6</sup>.

It was different for a third generation represented in this collection, those born in 1950 or after. It was precisely these same changes, so dramatic in the experience of many in the older group, that was more often the norm that framed their religious experiences. Certainly by adolescence if not before, the power of that Catholic subculture, dominant into the 1950s, had sharply receded. As Catholics became more middle class and suburban after 1945, that historic Catholic quality that Charles Morris dubbed "its prickly apartness" ebbed as well. Even before Vatican II, many practicing Catholics no longer perceived modern (and decidedly secular) American culture as a major "occasion of sin" that bore for those who indulged the prospect of eternal damnation. By the mid- 1960s, what had been a subterranean rivulet now seemed an all-too-public flood. Vatican II, with its emphasis on religious freedom, an understanding of the role of history and culture on the "immutable" teachings of the church, and the importance of the laity in the collective life of the church community, made obsolete overnight—or so it seemed—a century of American ultramontanism. The famous bastion of orthodoxy for the young, the *Baltimore Catechism*, with its theological nibblets doled out in singsong phrases suitable for memorization, suddenly encouraged individual thought. The reversal of what but a few years before had been deemed heretical in matters of faith, coupled with the use of English in the liturgy, symbolized even for the

youngest that the Church could, and did, change. For believing American Catholics, the opening line of *God's Grandeur*, a poem by the nineteenth-century British Jesuit Gerard Manley Hopkins, took on new meanings: "The world is charged with the grandeur of God," Hopkins extolled. "It will flame out, like shining from shook foil." And all of this occurred during the 1960s as well<sup>7</sup>.

This expectation of continued fundamental change within the faith tradition framed the youthful experiences of this third cohort in ways significantly different from the other two. Nevertheless, all of the contributors to this volume were touched by these forces in their own ways. For some, the sacred and secular upheavals of that decade instigated a basic reevaluation of their religious tradition that would revitalize their faith commitment. Others discovered that the faith of their youth simply could not engage the new sense of the possible evident in the music, the politics, and the explosion of ideas sprung loose, in secular fashion, "like shining from shook foil." Still others at first welcomed the change symbolized by the merging of the two sources of upheaval as personified in the person of a nun, standing in the sanctuary, by the altar, often still in her traditional religious dress, strumming the guitar during Mass. But as the reaction set in, as Church authorities sought to check what they now considered the excesses of Vatican II, the Church's role in their lives diminished for some essayists, to say nothing of American Catholics in general. A turning point here, of course, was the 1968 publication of Paul VI's encyclical, *Humanae Vitae*, which declared that, as a matter of faith for all Catholics, the use of birth control to regulate family size was forbidden. Given that a papal commission had suggested the opposite course, the negative reaction was intense, particularly in America<sup>8</sup>.

Regardless of individual resolutions, the historians here, like American Catholics more broadly, had to confront certain fundamental tensions propelled by their experiences of the past and their understandings of these new possibilities. In one respect, the changes associated with Vatican II spoke directly to our professional historical sensibilities. If history and culture—historicism, in the language of our graduate seminars—now might modulate the absolutist and ahistorical insistence that church doctrine never changed, that might resolve certain tensions between one's professional thinking and one's faith. Or it might until the retrenchment under John Paul II reasserted more than once the all-encompassing assertion of doctrinal immutability and papal infallibility. But there was a more complex layer of tension as well. If, as Peter Steinfels has noted, Catholicism acknowledged "that its claim to be ahistorical and immutable was unfounded, or once it acknowledged that yesterday's heretics were in fact today's 'separated brethren,' could historical consciousness and ecumenism stop short of total relativism?" In the long continuum of responses to this question, from the historians in this collection as from a wide swath of American Catholics in thought and deed since the 1960s, reside clues to understanding the vitality of contemporary American Catholicism and to the changed tone of the faith for those who remained joined with that communion. In those responses as well one can find an understanding of those who have left<sup>9</sup>.

What follows are the essays by eight historians touched by Catholicism on the meaning of that experience and its effect on their professional work. The essays are presented in broad chronological order, organized more by generational cohort than by specific date of birth. The essays are reflections, in some cases even meditations, and were never intended to conform to the structure and methodology of the historical article for a professional journal. Still, we have tried to shed some light on the inner processes that create that very work.

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<sup>1</sup> The participants included, as presenters, James Barrett, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign; David Emmons, University of Montana; Maureen Fitzgerald, College of William and Mary; Philip Gleason, University of Notre Dame; Joseph McCartin, Georgetown University; John McGreevy, University of Notre Dame; Steve Rosswurm, Lake Forest College; Nick Salvatore, Cornell University; and Christopher Shannon, University of Notre Dame. Those who commented on the papers were Mark Noll, Wheaton College; David O'Brien, College of the Holy Cross; Albert Raboteau, Princeton University; Robert Sullivan, University of Notre Dame; and Leslie Woodcock Tentler, Catholic University of America.

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<sup>2</sup> Nick Salvatore, "Herbert Gutman's Narrative of the American Working Class: A Reevaluation," *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society* 12, no. 1(1998): 43-80; John McGreevy, *Parish Boundaries: The Catholic Encounter with Race in the Twentieth-Century Urban North* (Chicago, 1996), 4.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, L. P. Curtis Jr., ed., *The Historian's Workshop: Original Essays by Sixteen Historians* (New York, 1970); Paul A. Cimballa and Robert F. Himmelberg, eds., *Historians and Race: Autobiography and the Writing of History* (Bloomington, IN, 1996); Bruce Kuklick and D. G. Hart, eds., *Religious Advocacy and American History* (Grand Rapids, MI, 1997).

<sup>4</sup> My thanks to Dave Emmons for calling these essays to my attention in the months following the conference.

<sup>5</sup> John McGreevy describes *ultramontanism* as "a cluster of shifts that included a Vatican-fostered move to Thomistic philosophy, a more intense experiential piety centered on miracles and Vatican-approved devotions such as that of the Sacred Heart, an international outlook suspicious of national variations within Catholicism, and a heightened respect for church authorities ranging from the pope to parish priests. All this was nurtured in the world of Catholic parishes, schools, and associations, whose members understood themselves as arrayed against the wider society." See McGreevy, *Catholicism and American Freedom: A History* (New York, 2003), 12-13.

<sup>6</sup> On the American Catholic encounter with modernity, particularly in the 1790s, the 1890s, and the 1960s, see Jay Dolan, *In Search of an American Catholicism: A History of Religion and Culture in Tension* (New York, 2002). For an insightful analysis of these issues following Vatican II (1962-1965), see Peter Steinfels, *A People Adrift: The Crisis of the Roman Catholic Church in America* (New York, 2003).

<sup>7</sup> Charles Morris, *American Catholic: The Saints and Sinners Who Built America's Most Powerful Church* (New York, 1997), 323-34 (the quote is on page vii); Dolan, *In Search of an American Catholicism*, 180-89; Steinfels, *A People Adrift*, 32; W. H. Gardner and N. H. Mackenzie, eds., *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, 4th ed. (London, 1967), 66.

<sup>8</sup> On this encyclical and the American reaction to it, see Steinfels, *A People Adrift*, 255-67.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.