

## Book Review

Schmiesing, K. (2014). *Catholicism and Historical Narrative: A Catholic Engagement With Historical Scholarship*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

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First, in the interest of full disclosure, let me confess that I am a cradle Catholic. Twelve years of Catholic education under my belt, and with a few perhaps less than devout excursions in a past not nearly as sordid as I might wish, I seem to have developed what my old friend, Father Mike Mahoney, once called an adult relationship with the Church. My path back has been a circuitous one, characterized by caution and curiosity.

And so it is that I took up the reading of *Catholicism and Historical Narrative*, edited by Kevin Schmiesing, a scholar and author out of Penn, late of the Acton Institute in Michigan. Schmiesing has assembled an all-star roster of scholars to augment and often contest the traditional narratives of noteworthy incidents in American history. In some cases, the authors attempt to challenge the usual discourse of conventional American wisdom, such as Scott McDermott's piece on Protestant scholasticism during the early years of Harvard University. In others, for instance Ernest Greco's substantive reimagining of the role of the Catholic Church in the Holocaust, the traditional narrative (that Catholic popes were at least passively anti-Semitic during the years leading up to Hitler's attempt to eradicate the Jews from Europe) is frankly confronted and amended. And while each essay in this book has merit, a close reading and consideration of *Catholicism and Historical Narrative* yields something else: an underlying commentary on the moral state of the nation.

Let's look at some examples. The aforementioned conventional wisdom understood by most reasonably educated Americans is that the Puritans left England, involuntarily, stopped in the Netherlands to plan their next move, and crossed the Atlantic in the *Mayflower* bound for the New World to establish Plymouth and the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Seeking religious freedom and new opportunity, the Puritans created an essentially Protestant state, and are responsible, certainly as much as anybody else, for creating the Protestant culture upon which the United States was later built. McDermott suggests, however, that while Catholicism did not perhaps purchase a first-class voyage on the *Mayflower*; it did indeed travel as a stowaway in the hold. He uses the development of scholasticism at Harvard University as his microcosm, arguing that from its earliest days, Harvard was not a purely Puritanical temple of learning but was rather influenced by foundational teachings of the Holy Roman Church, among which were the two great New Testament commandments: Love God, and love thy neighbor as thyself.

From its earliest days, American society and the mythology of American culture have been driven by four pragmatic concepts: the pressing outward of white expansion, most vividly illustrated in the search for the limits of the *frontier*; the use of *freedom* and initiative to seek broader *opportunity* for the individual; and the pursuit of personal *choice* as the vehicle to explore and attain the other three. Thus the formula, if you will, for the practical pur-

suit of success in the New World has historically been freedom + opportunity + choice + frontier = success (or transcendence).

To this reader, the formula has no greater depiction in American letters than Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, wherein Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale escape from the confines of Puritan society to the wilderness so they may pursue choice and opportunity (in the quest for romantic love, or transcendence). A lovely story, to be sure, but let us not forget their quest was cheapened by the larger society and ultimately condemned as sin.

Thomas Jodziewicz, in his treatise on Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin, reinforces the power of personal choice in the American narrative by stating that America has always been a "pro-choice" nation. Not, he quickly adds, in the rather shallow, or at least focused and politicized, current narrative on abortion, but as a general core belief in the American consciousness. Jodziewicz, via his description of the American mantra, *a la* Day and Maurin, of individual rights and collective responsibility, leavens the mantra with its correlate, collective rights and individual responsibility. And it is here that a larger critique of the moral state of our nation begins to fully emerge. Implicit in Day's and Maurin's thinking, according to Jodziewicz, is the notion that these two conceptual pairings must be balanced with one another for a genuinely moral and just society to flourish. In modern America, Day and Maurin might well argue, the balance has been offended, with inordinate weight placed upon the rights of the individual and insufficient attention granted to the need for collective rights in a democratic society.

A third essay in Schmiesing's book, one assured to offend more than a few readers given the current climate of ideological battle in our United States, is by Clement Anthony Mulloy, and addresses the path of progressivism in American thought as exemplified by Margaret Sanger. As many readers no doubt already know, Sanger is often considered the patron saint of women's rights and reproductive

freedom in America, and elsewhere. And Mulloy takes more than a little time and space in validating some of Sanger's contributions to these issues. Yet Mulloy also points out the wages of extremism that, some would argue, pervaded 20<sup>th</sup> century progressivism in its later days. As an example, he discusses Sanger's abiding debate with the Catholic priest, Monsignor John Ryan.

Ryan's focus was on the need of a living wage for the working class in America. Thus, his principles arose from a core belief in economic justice. His form of progressivism, were one to call it that, was to oppose the excesses of capitalism which, in Ryan's view, were antithetical to the pursuit of a living wage for the working class and the attainment of something approaching economic justice in the early decades of the American 20th century.

The debate between Ryan and Sanger was essentially a debate over the meaning of natural (or moral) law. Ryan argued that moral law was abiding, and established through the course of human history, per St. Augustine. Sanger's position was that moral law was more fluid, changing with societal changes and advances in the human condition. Where the argument boiled over was on the relationship of moral/natural law and what was known then as the eugenics movement.

Eugenics was an outgrowth of the generally progressive ideal of improving society via social engineering. While many aspects of progressivism were embodied in the improvement of the immigrant experience, the redistribution of wealth, and the empowerment of the working class, eugenics sought nothing short of the elevation of the human condition by means of limiting the reproductive powers of citizens deemed inadequate or undesirable. Examples were immigrants, whose rates of childbearing were rapidly outpacing those of nativist Americans, the "enfeebled," and others whose sterilization was considered to be beneficial to the overall well-being of American society. To Margaret Sanger, the possibilities of such engineering were an extension of her definition of reproductive

rights; to Ryan, eugenics was a grievous offense against moral and natural law.

Woven throughout the essays in this book are the issues of generally accepted moral authority, the path to salvation and transcendence that is part of what constitutes the so-called American Dream, and the gradual cheapening of our pragmatic American formula for achieving this dream. In one way or another, using one historical episode or another, the authors combine to suggest that in America, the grand pursuit of new experience, freedom, opportunity and choice have become

debased into the idolatry of narcissism, the chimeric search for meaning through consumerism, and the drugging of our individual and cultural dreams. Pretty heavy stuff.

Unfortunately, though, these themes must be teased out from the accumulation of each individual story. What is missing from *Catholicism and Historical Narrative* is a summative chapter or epilogue that makes overt and possibly enriches what attentive readers must presently consider solely on their own. Whether this is a strength or a weakness of this book, each reader must individually decide.