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BOOK REVIEW FORUM

Perspectives

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John McGreevy has written a book of such breadth and erudition as to daunt a would-be reviewer. How to evaluate so formidable an achievement? One could, of course, devote one's allotted paragraphs exclusively to praise, all of which would be merited. (McGreevy's engaging prose would come in for prominent mention.) But what then of the critical eye that every reviewer hopes to train on even the most accomplished work of scholarship? McGreevy himself suggests a way out: "Specialists will regret what is missing," he notes in the book's introduction, "and rightly so." Given the remarkable range of subjects the book actually covers, however, quibbling over its inevitable omissions seems neither charitable nor fruitful. Best, perhaps, to "think out loud" about the impact of McGreevy's global perspective on my own assumptions as a historian of American Catholicism. Needless to say, his is a book from which I learned a great deal.

No historian of American Catholicism needs to be reminded that her subject has a transnational dimension. The Catholic church was an immigrant institution for better than a century, fed by streams of uprooted peoples from an almost bewildering array of locales. Recent decades have seen a resumption of heavy immigration, much of it at least nominally Catholic. Immigrant numbers required—and today require—the importation of religious professionals: priests and most especially sisters who spoke the language of the new arrivals. Devotions in even the most assimilated parishes were likewise imported from Europe, while the nation's most powerful bishops and even the more prominent of local church authorities were increasingly the product of European, mainly Roman, education. Thanks to a revolution in communications, most American Catholics by the mid-nineteenth century knew not just the name of the current pope but understood at a visceral level that he embodied their tribe. (No, they did not read encyclicals; Al Smith was not an anomaly.) Even in the interwar years of the twentieth century, by which time Catholic colleges were numerous, Catholic intellectual life in the United States depended primarily on Europe and especially France.

For all its seeming foreignness, Catholicism flourished on American soil. Levels of religious practice were surprisingly high for so impoverished a population, while even immigrant Catholics were prodigious supporters of religious institutions. Nowhere else on the globe have Catholics built so extensive a network of Catholic schools in the absence of state support. Native vocations to the priesthood and religious life were increasing significantly by the middle of the nineteenth century and grew apace thereafter. (As has always and everywhere been the case, women far outnumbered men in the ranks of new recruits.) With assimilation and upward mobility, religious practice grew increasingly disciplined, and support swelled as well for Catholic

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institutional separatism: Catholic schooling at every level, Catholic hospitals and charitable organizations, even separate Catholic societies for academics and members of the secular professions. The American church on the eve of the Second Vatican Council was to all appearances in a state of robust health. Mass attendance and priestly vocations might be declining quite sharply in much of Catholic Europe, but not (yet) in the United States.

An American historian of my generation will instinctively seek to explain this flourishing by reference to American circumstances. We invoke the advantages conferred on Catholics by a religiously neutral state, the energies generated by competition in a diverse religious marketplace, the solidarity promoted by the anti-Catholicism so integral to American politics and culture, and the social dynamics of an immigrant nation where religion emerged early on as a principal bearer of ethnic identity. We are not wholly wrong to do so: religions of multiple varieties have historically found fertile ground in the United States, and the Catholicism that evolved on these shores was in fact an unusually vigorous product. The American church had striking success at holding the loyalties of working-class men, which was not the case in much of Catholic Europe, while "leakage" from its ranks until recent decades appears to have been surprisingly modest. Affluence and education seemed only to increase adherence. Catholic upward mobility soared in the fifteen years after World War II, when a degree from a Catholic college was the best predictor of a woman's conformity to her church's hard teaching on contraception.

McGreevy's book, however, has challenged my hitherto unquestioning faith in American religious exceptionalism. More than American distinctiveness, it seems, is at work in our history of Catholic success, given the religious energies pulsing in Catholic Europe for much of the nineteenth and into the twentieth centuries and the extent of Catholic missionary achievements in Africa and Asia. European Catholics built religiously separate institutions with close to the zeal of their American counterparts, despite diverse national circumstances. They flocked to the proliferating devotions so characteristic of Catholicism in its ultramontane mode, sometimes in truly astonishing numbers. Young women in particular were drawn to the vowed religious life in numbers equally astonishing: fully 571 women's religious congregations were founded, most of them in Europe, over the course of the nineteenth century, nearly all of which were engaged in active service like teaching, nursing, or catechesis. Recruitment to the priesthood also recovered from the depths of the early nineteenth century and remained strong in most locales into at least the early decades of the twentieth. Missionary work exerted an increasingly powerful attraction, and the global church for many decades depended heavily on European priests and religious.

McGreevy's multinational narrative of Catholic success points me toward a somewhat uncomfortable conclusion: that ultramontane Catholicism had intrinsic appeal in a stunning variety of cultural circumstances. (Given my temperament and upbringing, I am not the sort of Catholic apt to grasp this appeal instinctively or find it rewarding to explore.) So much in ultramontane Catholicism seems more than faintly embarrassing to someone of my background—the obdurate papacy at war with modernity, the emphasis on the miraculous and saintly intercessors, the ubiquity of emotionally florid Marian devotions. And yet such things could obviously be a source of comfort and religious certitude, particularly in circumstances other than those of a twenty-first-century academic. Nor was ultramontane Catholicism incapable of change as circumstances altered. Popes and certain intellectuals might rail against democracy, but prudence required that the Catholic masses advance the interests of the church by

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democratic means, sometimes in the guise of Catholic political parties. As leftist movements strengthened toward the close of the nineteenth century, Catholic leaders spoke in terms of a "third way" between socialism and an unfettered capitalism and promoted a reform agenda that helped in many places to pave the way for the welfare state. That Catholic women religious, prior to the nineteenth century a primarily cloistered population, embraced active ministries in such numbers in the ultramontane church made that church seem oddly congruent with the broader trend in industrializing countries toward greater emancipation for women. Ultramontane Catholicism, in short, could look plausibly "modern," even as it warred against secular liberalism.

McGreevy concludes his book's lengthy midsection on various aspects of the ultramontane "milieu" in 1962, the year that saw the opening session of the Second Vatican Council. Does he mean to suggest by this that ultramontane Catholicism died a sudden death in the course of the council's deliberations? Clearly not. Discontent with the ahistorical rigidities of Catholic intellectual life was growing, at least among Catholic elites, as McGreevy explains in an especially thoughtful chapter. (Even mildly venturesome theology could be risky for priest-intellectuals, several of whom were silenced by Rome in the waning years of Pius XII's long pontificate.) And as McGreevy also notes, both religious practice and religious vocations were declining in many European locales. Still, signs of Catholic strength abounded. It was Catholic statesmen who engineered the crucial first steps toward European unity in the wake of the Second World War. Catholic intellectuals enjoyed unprecedented prestige in postwar Europe and indeed elsewhere, when rival ideologies seemed to be exhausted. And Catholic practice remained strong in many places, including some in Europe—in the Netherlands, for example, and portions of Catholic Germany. The same was true of the United States and Canada, as well as a number of Europe's former colonies, where Catholics figured disproportionately in the first generation of national leaders.

Whatever its strengths in the postwar years, the Catholic church by the mid-1960s was in a state of turmoil. The usual indicators of religious health—Mass attendance and recruitment to vowed religious vocations—were in sharp decline, not just throughout Europe but also North America. Tensions over sexual ethics went painfully public, with the church ultimately losing nearly all credibility—certainly with the laity but also many clergy—in matters pertaining to sex. Theologians openly disputed what had long been settled points of doctrine. All of which poses a crucial question: did the reforms of the Second Vatican Council cause what was widely regarded as something close to a Catholic collapse? (Such a characterization, certainly exaggerated, assumes an exclusive focus on the church in the industrialized world.) McGreevy does indeed ask the question, as any historian of the period must. But I do not think he answers it—not in so many words, at least. In fairness, the question is essentially unanswerable, dealing as it does with a counterfactual. Nonetheless, I would like his opinion. If this constitutes a criticism on my part, it is the only one I have to offer of this genuinely splendid work of scholarship.

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