

**The Past as Pilgrimage: Narrative, Tradition and the Renewal of Catholic History** by Christopher Shannon and Christopher Blum (*Front Royal, VA: Christendom Press, 2014*), xiv + 174 pp.

CHRISTOPHER SHANNON AND Christopher Blum have written a fascinating and challenging book. It is directed to historians who are also Catholics, not Catholics who happen to be historians. I am one of those, part of the target group they hope to reach and persuade to bring their faith life to bear on their work. I need little persuading—but am greatly appreciative of their instructions on how to do it well and in the proper spirit. Alasdair MacIntyre, whose ideas inspired and inform their book, said that the study of the past should have a virtuous, “sacred” component, that it should be part of the practice of “right judgment.”<sup>1</sup> *The Past as Pilgrimage* is Shannon’s and Blum’s affectionate tribute to “virtuous history,” to “research” as a re-searching for something substantial, even noble.

I am not a student of medieval Europe or eighteenth-century France, where being a Catholic historian gives one a certain built-in advantage, a “hermeneutic of affection,” as it was once described to me. I was responsible for courses in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America, meaning the history of the most purposeful amnesiacs ever to trod God’s earth at the time when forgetfulness was thought a necessary prerequisite to progress. Whatever pilgrimages they set out on were not to the past. They scarcely acknowledged that they had had one.

My field of research, however, was more specialized. I am, and remain even in retirement, a student of the lives of immigrant/ethnic working people. Even more specifically, I am re-searching into the lives of those in that demographic subset who were from Ireland, exiles, as they preferred to call themselves, of that sainted and Catholic-saturated land, and quite possibly the least forgetful people ever to trod God’s earth. A hermeneutic of affection was and is as available to me as to anyone.

And Shannon and Blum’s book may be as relevant to me as to anyone. In any event, I claim the indulgence of making it such, and for what I hope is one very good reason: America did not just experience periodic anti-Catholic movements; “America *was* an anti-Catholic movement.” My source for this clear truth was Sydney Ahlstrom,

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<sup>1</sup> Shannon and Blum touch on this on xi–xii.

the dean of historians of American religion.<sup>2</sup> Ahlstrom's conclusion was a bit nonchalant, but it was intended seriously; it may even have been celebratory. The likes of me must be counted among America's apparently perpetual Others. For an American historian, outsiderness is a signal blessing, an advantage that is mine and my fellow "Papists" alone. What Shannon's and Blum's book has done is convince me of the historiographical foothold that "Ahlstrom's truth" provides. The role of outsider gives my hermeneutic special traction. Maybe it gave me a second hermeneutic, one of disaffection. The one may well require the other; I will try to use both.

Exploring the differences between Catholic and non-Catholic, taking Ahlstrom's point literally, is the only way to understand the Catholic experience in America. But reverse the order. It is also the case that it is the key to understanding U.S. history. Like it or not—and most Americans will not—American history cannot be understood without reference to the experience of Catholics as a *Catholic* experience. It is here that Shannon's and Blum's plea for a "renewal of Catholic history" is especially relevant for Americanists. Looking at the American past through a Catholic lens, asking Catholic questions of that past, in sum, putting a Catholic hermeneutic of affection to work in a place where the Catholic presence was not always—or ever—welcome, is the best imaginable way to challenge the established narrative.

Take, for example, G. K. Chesterton's semi-famous remark that traditional societies—Catholic ones by way of obvious example—practice a "democracy of the dead."<sup>3</sup> Past generations do not lie moldering in their graves; they are enfranchised, they have a vote, and their vote must be counted. In Shannon's and Blum's words, we find "the present in the past." The self-consciously Protestant/secular American society was of a decidedly different mind: the earth, they told themselves, belonged to the living, and to no one else. Walter Lippmann spoke for them all when he complained that the "past has been used to throttle the present"<sup>4</sup> and stated: "Men can

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted by Robert Orsi, "U.S. Catholics between Memory and Modernity: How Catholics Are American," in *Catholics in the American Century: Recasting Narratives of U.S. History*, ed. R. Scott Appleby and Katherine Sprows Cummings (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012): 11–42, at 15.

<sup>3</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (New York: John Lane, 1908), 85.

<sup>4</sup> Walter Lippmann, *Drift and Mastery: An Attempt to Diagnose the Current Unrest* (New York: Mitchell Kennerly, 1914), 302.

reverence the dead if they are buried. But they will no longer sit at table with corpses, ghosts, and skeletons [or—to insert the obvious—allow them a vote]”; Society “must [reject] a confusion of life and death.”<sup>5</sup> MacIntyre’s call for the cultivation of the “virtue of having an adequate sense of the traditions to which one belongs or which confront one” (4) is not on conspicuous display here.

The “virtue of right judgment” was one “rooted in lived experience;” it had a “grasp of [the] future possibilities which the past has made available to the present.” The past does not “throttle the present;” it liberates and instructs it by passing down what it—and it alone—knows. It makes available, in other words, “the data of the past, for the sake of the future thriving of our communities” (4). I would have preferred a word other than “data,” which is too technocratic for something as intensely human as this, but I get the point. I also get this one: right judgment of the sort MacIntyre called for is the “historian’s standard;” it alone is capable of the “transmission of cultural” sensibilities from one generation to the next. It is “the quality or ability with respect to which the historian may most properly be called good or wise” (2–4). And it calls Catholic historians to their duty.

This returns the discussion to Chesterton, who also wrote—rather more famously—that, in America, “even the Catholics are Protestants.”<sup>6</sup> If he is right, then I have been stripped of my status as outsider. My hermeneutic has been silenced. But I believe that Chesterton was wrong about that second remark, and I believe that, if asked, Shannon and Blum would be of that mind too. So I will presume to speak for the three of us: we hope that Americans generally and historians in particular will take to heart Seamus Heaney’s poetic rendering of what the democracy of the dead meant. Heaney, who knew something about traditional and Catholic society, wrote: “I cock my ear / . . . / in the shared calling of blood / arrives my need / for antediluvian lore.”<sup>7</sup> The verdict of right judgment has had no lovelier or more apt expressions.

We all—Irish blood or no—need our daily allowance of antediluvian lore; it is the historian’s responsibility to provide it, and that is no

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<sup>5</sup> Lippmann, *Drift and Mastery*, 300.

<sup>6</sup> Quote by E.J. Dionne, “We Are All Liberals Now,” *Commonweal* 126 (November 19, 1999).

<sup>7</sup> Seamus Heaney, “Gifts of Rain,” in *Selected Poems, 1966–1987* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1990), 23.

paltry responsibility. Lore—history, memory, stories, songs—is what holds society together and keeps it from running away with itself. The most “discerning” of Catholic historians *qua* pilgrims know and celebrate that. Shannon and Blum cite the work of both Eamon Duffy and—somewhat problematically, I think—Joseph Ratzinger / Pope Benedict XVI, as exemplars. Both put right judgment on full display in their work; both tell “the stories necessary for the transmission of the virtues that support Christian life” (133). The Irish told more of those stories than most and counted on their consoling grace more than any. I will let another English convert, Evelyn Waugh, speak to these points. Waugh once wrote that, alone among America’s Catholics, only the Irish possessed the “hard, ancient wisdom” sufficient to the task of spurning the “multifarious frauds of [American] modernity.”<sup>8</sup> I am not sure it was wisdom that allowed that; it may simply have been incomprehension. It matters not.

Obviously, the canvas of *The Past as Pilgrimage* is far broader than Catholics in America. Indeed, it is about as broad a canvas as can be imagined. Shannon and Blum believe that historians, by definition, are time travelers: they travel only on one-way roads, but even at that, there is a blurring of time in the nature of what they do. Who better for the trip than Catholics? We are certainly well practiced—or should be. Membership in the Mystical Body does not end at grave sites; once a member, always a member. Which gives to the dead a special status and to the study of their lives a special, sacred meaning. Shannon’s and Blum’s book not only makes that clear but also presents unassailable reasons why the historians’ craft is time-travel of a special sort. It is a pilgrimage, a journey of moral and spiritual significance. Historians should be discerning pilgrims. I mean discerning in the Ignatian sense of self-discovery as well as in the sense of historical discovery—Catholic pilgrims with Catholic banners flying. We call ours a “pilgrim church.” It is time to take that seriously and for each of us to take our “pilgrim souls” seriously as well.

Shannon and Blum also make the very good point that, even secular historians are coming to a greater appreciation of traditions, of the “present in the past.” They cite specifically—and quite appropriately—E. P. Thompson’s monumental *The Making of the English Working Class* and Thompson’s “radical reappraisal” of the importance

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<sup>8</sup> Quoted in James P. Shannon, “The Irish Catholic Imagination,” in *Roman Catholicism and the American Way of Life*, ed. Thomas McAvoy (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1960), 204–5.

of “pre-modern customs and traditions” (115). They do not quote Thompson’s description of Catholic customs and traditions as “the hocus-pocus of Romanism,” what Max Weber, who inspired much of Thompson’s work, called Catholic “enchantment.” “Hocus-pocus” is dismissive and edges toward offensive. What counted, however, was not Thompson’s lapse in manners, but that he took cultural sensibilities seriously, just not seriously enough to want to share in the religiousness of them. His Marxist hermeneutic, among other factors, would not permit that.

Catholic historians like Duffy and Pope Benedict are not similarly restrained. Nor should any Catholic historian be. Pilgrims are not tourists; they are seekers. They visit with the dead; join them at table; go to Mass with them; share the enchantment, the hocus-pocus. In other words, they sustain the “moral community” by entering fully into it and carrying its stories forward. Right judgment means understanding that history, as Shannon and Blum remind us, is not biography. The individual, ripped from her or his social moorings, cannot be the carrier of tradition because the individual verdict, as such, is entirely subjective. Historical truths are communal truths. Morals and virtues can be comprehended only through their relation to the community from which they come. And so Shannon and Blum instruct us: study either communities or individuals in community, including the communion of saints; it is there that “the sinuous strands of cultural transmission” (2) are to be found.

In Shannon’s and Blum’s minds, there is no higher calling for historians than finding those cultural and moral strands. Moral virtue is passed down through traditions, memories, narratives, and stories, including the non-rational, enchanted ones. Genuinely rational enquiry requires membership in a particular type of moral community. Some are Catholic; some are not. These communities can be held together by the non-rational. It is the community that is rational, not the traditions embedded within it. They can be hocus-pocus, but they must be studied and understood. And so we go on pilgrimages to the past; that is where our ancestral sorrows are to be found, our ancestral communities rediscovered, and the lessons derived from both carried lovingly forward.

What, however, of the by now tired argument that the “past (the land of the dead) is a foreign country; they do things differently there”? Dealing with foreign countries demands “objectivity.” But, regardless of how far “back” one goes or to how “foreign” a country, women and men will be found doing what women and men always

do: tending to the stories that sustain the life of their communities and trying to figure out where, what, and who they are in the world and what God has to do with all that. In this context, objectivity is sterile; it requires that God and the gods be rejected and ignored, made “obsolete,” as one of America’s best historians, Robert Orsi, has put it. Historical objectivity is the denial that the “transcendent” God ever “[breaks] into [present] time.” That is a seriously limiting perspective. In Shannon’s and Blum’s terms, it blocks historians from the “stories that uphold the good” (1–36). Objectivity is the noble dream that so often ends ignobly. There is nothing of substance behind it.

Jackson Lears, another whose work I greatly admire, once wrote that, without a “moral dimension,” history is mere pedantry and not worth the time.<sup>9</sup> Shannon and Blum would agree. Moral dimensions come in various shapes and sizes, and Catholics have one. Historians who are Catholic must not, then, disarm themselves and check their Catholicism at the door. On the contrary, they should approach the past with the same attentive reverence with which they would approach any other holy place to which they had come on pilgrimage.

I have one minor cavil with Shannon’s and Blum’s very fine book: there is a professional price to pay for having “too Catholic” a hermeneutic. I wish Shannon and Blum had said a bit more on that point and on the related ones of leaving Catholicism out of American history and confessed Catholics out of non-Catholic history departments. Nothing is more “heretical” than an even semi-confessional approach to historical inquiry. Historians whose “moral dimensions” are less “heretical” are given a pass. Historians who are Catholic are asked, seldom politely, to separate their “popery” from their teaching, research, and writing. No other “moral dimension,” from socialism to feminisms and everything beyond and in between, is similarly proscribed. Not only is this patently unjust; it distorts and degrades the entire academic enterprise. Shannon and Blum, however, have written a historiographical guide, not an instructional manual on academic career building. And it is a splendid guide, morally informed, beautifully written, and, above all, thoughtfully Catholic. N&V

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<sup>9</sup> Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880–1920* (New York: Pantheon, 1981), xix.