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Chapter Two

Not All Autobiography Is Scholarship

Thinking, as a Catholic, about History

Una M. Cadegan

I do not remember when I first heard the expression, "All scholarship is autobiography." I do remember that it made intuitive sense to me. What I took it to mean was that a scholar's project, his or her life's work and its distinguishing perspective, usually has deep roots in personal background and life experience. Like most helpful insights, this one can quickly become reductive. It can be used to dismiss work that deserves attention and evaluation if, in our impeccable judgment, a researcher's perspective is partisan or distorted. Nonetheless, it has long seemed evident to me that knowing something about who the scholars working in a field are is an important part of understanding how that field reflects its subject.

As I began drafting this essay, I set out to discover the source of this expression, and found I could not locate one. It also seems to be a much less common saying than I thought. To the extent that it has a source, it seems to be taken as a variant on the idea that "all history is (auto)biography," which can be found attributed to Nietzsche, Emerson, Macaulay, Carlyle, Disraeli, and Amos Oz. This idea, in its turn, is variously used to mean either that it is impossible to construct a collective account of the past (and, therefore, we remain mired in the inevitably
limited and self-interested memories of individuals) or, alternatively, that only individual life histories are interesting enough to sustain any real sense of the past.

So, faced with the evanescence of my central organizing idea, I did what any respectable scholar would do and decided to use it anyhow. Despite its apparent obscurity, it has served me pretty well for almost twenty years. The desire to comprehend within the grand sweep of things a group with which one identifies autobiographically—especially if they have been heretofore overlooked—can produce compelling, evocative scholarship.

My premise in this essay is that the historian of religion who is also a believer has a distinctive need for conscious reflection on this autobiographical connection. Without conscious reflection, it is too easy to fall into cheerleading on the one hand or score-settling on the other. It is even easier, perhaps, to lapse into self-indulgence—hence the caveat of my title, which is aimed primarily at myself. Thinking about the autobiographical roots of my work as an historian has made me more consciously attentive to doing the work of the historian, as historian, well. Thinking about where that work has taken me not only as an historian but also as a believer has opened up vistas I never would have imagined seeing. I will offer below three examples of how this has happened and is happening yet. The first has to do with the origins of my conscious awareness of the particular task of the believing historian who is a member of a tradition that makes historical claims; the second, with how that self-consciousness, once evoked, continually opens up new dimensions of that original task. The third episode attempts to capture some sense of how this sustained integration—pursuing the scholarly intellectual tasks of the believing historian—has reinvigorated and deepened the belief that helped prompt the intellectual journey.

THE DISENCHANTMENT OF THE WORLD

When I began graduate school, it was my first experience outside Catholic education since kindergarten. I probably should have expected some significant challenge to my worldview, but I was taken almost entirely
by surprise. In particular, I found exceedingly strange how exceedingly strange the people around me found the continued practice of religion. It was my first encounter with one of the foundational assumptions of the modern academy—the disenchantment of the world. I could not have put the issue to myself in these terms during those first two years. What I knew then, mostly, was that I felt very odd, and that what was normal and comfortable to me was alien and alienating to many others. This sense of estrangement had a personal dimension, an effect on the relationships I formed over those years, but the dimension important here is how it affected my encounter with the material I was studying. The first time I remember being able to begin to articulate what I was experiencing was in a course on American intellectual history taught by a great historian of American philosophy. We read a line-up of major thinkers I would be intimidated by even today—Jonathan Edwards, Chauncey Wright, Charles Peirce, Josiah Royce, William James, C.I. Lewis, Willard Quine. With each work that we read and discussed, in between my struggles simply to understand the content of what I was reading, I saw what seemed to be an increasingly systematic attempt to explain almost everything without any reference to God. (That this came as a surprise to me in the early 1980s is itself cultural evidence of an interesting sort.) My primary reaction to this attempt was a kind of bafflement—not just at the inability to understand the ideas, but to see why these authors would go to all this trouble. Since God did exist, and that existence did explain so many of these things, why spend time trying to construct an alternative explanation? I was too shy, and too conscious of my own naïveté, to ask questions about this in class. However, in what I now suspect was not a coincidence, the professor in almost every seminar pointed out the places in the text where the author was in fact attempting to leave room for the possibility of religious belief. It still seemed to me to be a waste of effort, but it was an important lesson in what not to assume about a writer’s intentions.

When it came time to select a paper topic for the course, I asked if I could write about T.S. Eliot. I knew very little about him, but I did know that he had, after more or less defining the modern as a landscape within which religious belief was impossible, converted to Christianity and spent the rest of his career writing poetry influenced by that
perspective. During the secondary research for this paper, I became aware for the first time of the disdain Eliot earned for his conversion and the apparent scholarly consensus about the negative effect on his poetry of his capitulation to meaning. My resulting analysis was pretty painfully ingenuous, though the professor was not nearly as hard on it as it deserved. What helped set me on the course I am still following today, though, was reading Eliot's *Four Quartets* for the first time. I had studied as an undergraduate some of Eliot's shorter important poems, but on picking up the *Four Quartets* all I knew about them was that they were the longest and most important work he wrote after his conversion.

Feeling very scholarly and very artistic at the same time, I lay on the beanbag chair in the living room of my apartment and read the poems out loud. The first, "Burnt Norton," made little impression on me, then or now. But the second, "East Coker," worked its way into my consciousness as no work of art had ever done before. By the time I reached the lines that begin the poem's final stanza, I was having a hard time reading out loud through the tears. I like thinking about the comedy someone like David Lodge or even Muriel Spark could find in this picture, because making fun of it might be the only way to convey how serious an experience it was. "Home is where one starts from. As we grow older / The world becomes stranger, the pattern more complicated / Of dead and living" were words so deeply true to my experience of moving out and away from a working-class upbringing in an industrial town on the Ohio River to graduate study at an Ivy League university that they could easily be weighed down by their own solemnity into trivial cliche. Looking back on this moment and laughing preserves them from that fate and reminds me of what path this experience put me on—or, better, revealed I was already on, and who had walked it before me.

All this is prelude to the conversation that really forms the focus of this first of my three episodes, which occurred during the first semester of my second year of graduate work. If I had been unprepared intellectually and emotionally for my initial encounter with analytic philosophy, I was even less fit to begin an exploration of postmodernist literary theory. I was by this time conscious enough of my own struggle to have a more coherent notion of what was getting in my way. The foreseeable
difficulty of reading the dense and difficult prose with any understand-
ing was compounded by my inability to believe that the texts I was read-
ing actually said what they said. It seemed very clear to me that what I
was encountering was a worldview, one which presumed as a starting
point (without making a case or an argument for the starting point's
necessity) the rejection of traditional religious belief and practice in any
form. I could not make sense of how to discuss the ideas in these texts
without discussing this deep background, but neither the texts them-
selves nor the seminar discussions seemed to offer an opening. Hoping
for some advice on how to address this difficulty, how to make my way
into a conversation that interested me but didn't seem to have any room
for me, I made an appointment with the seminar professor. Her reaction
took me aback. The course, she said, was moving in the direction it was
moving, and if I wasn't interested in that direction I was free to drop it.
This response was not as heartless as it might seem in cold print, just
honest, but the choice was nonetheless that stark. The realization I had
in reaction was one of the real turning points of my intellectual life, and
I trusted the honesty of this professor enough that I even articulated it
at the time. It was always going to be the case that any scholar engaged
in historical study who was Christian would have to sort out what it
means that Christianity makes claims about events that happened in a
certain time and place. I would just have to give things some time and
see what I could work out for myself. The instructor responded that
the only person she was aware of in the field of literary studies who
had maintained a religious perspective and yet earned wide respect as a
scholar was Walter Ong. I was at that point only vaguely aware of who
Ong was, but looking back I can see now that that moment was when
he joined the throng of people who would be my guides and supports
through the next stages of the journey, whether or not they ever became
aware of their roles.

I left this meeting with something much more valuable than the ge-
neric reassurance I had been looking for going into it. I had a new clarity
about a central aspect of my intellectual life and my scholarly project. If
I was going to become a scholar in the company of these people who so
dazzled me even as they were shaking the foundations of my beliefs, and
at the same time maintain the religious identity that was too central to
who I am to imagine relinquishing it, it was up to me to take responsibil-
ity for working out how they could fit together. Clarity about a task does
not automatically supply skill or peace of mind in performing it, and I
had little of either for the rest of that year. But what I did and do have
was an intellectual project that is still preoccupying me, both explicitly
and in the background of almost everything else I do as an historian. It
is at once the most abstract and dense theological problem—the impli-
cations of the Incarnation for understanding human life on earth—and
the most pragmatic evidentiary and methodological task.

On the practical end, this self-conscious awareness from early on
of the special responsibility believers have for taking into account the
historical claims of their traditions has helped me develop two aspects
of my work that potentially benefit both church and academy. The first
is a continual awareness of the extent to which religion and religious
believers were a factor in American history and culture. For a number
of reasons, including the significantly increased secular focus of U.S.
school curriculums following the school decisions of the 1960s, religion
and religious believers receded into the background of U.S. history to an
extent that distorted the narrative. Restoring this wide variety of actors
to their appropriate place on the historical stage is not primarily an act
of devotion or denominational partisanship; in fact, it could be as easi-
ly justified as faithful adherence to the Enlightenment value of careful
attention to all relevant evidence. Catholics have been especially absent
from general accounts of U.S. history—religion is seen as an important
dimension of New England settlement, of early-nineteenth-century
evangelical expansion, of antislavery activism, but somehow disappears
as a category when large numbers of Catholic and Jewish immigrants
start arriving in the years following 1830. Labor historians seldom take
the predominance of Catholics among the U.S. working class into ac-
count in their work, and the history of women’s religious congregations
is only very recently being taken seriously as a crucial and fascinat-
ing dimension of women’s history. It can be argued, and fairly well-
documented by correlation, that immigration history became a lively
subfield at the point when a scholarly generation who were the children
and grandchildren of predominantly Catholic immigrants entered the academy. It would be simplistic to the point of offense to argue that scholars can and should only study “people like us.” It seems evident, however, that what prompts interest in history on the part of many historians is the impulse to understand how the community that produced them was shaped historically—hence the historian’s distinctive variant of “all scholarship is autobiography.” If the result of such investigation is to restore to the historical narrative people and events unreasonably overlooked, church and academy both benefit.

There is a second pragmatic consequence of taking on as a contemporary historian this awareness of the historical claims of religious traditions. In a review of Marilynne Robinson’s novel *Gilead*, critic Judith Shulevitz wrote in *Slate*, “It was the critics struggling to determine whether a book this religious could also be literature who made me understand why I found it unforgettable. For inspiration Robinson has reached so far into the prehistory of American writing that she bypasses the Enlightenment conviction that art is distinct from religion.” Shulevitz diagnoses here a condition of the contemporary novel that provides an important analogy for historians. Because religion has for several historians’ generations been inadequately developed as a category of analysis, we are lacking in the tools for dealing with its evidence. We have difficulty distinguishing between theological or devotional language as primary source evidence and as profession of faith. We find it easy to explain away as a by-product of or mask for the intersections of gender, race, and class. Conversely, we try to erase the categorical autonomy of race, gender, and class because their history so often tarnishes what we want to believe about the efficacy of religious belief and religious community. Well-trained historians who are also believers in traditions that make historical claims seem to me to have a particular obligation to help hone the tools that have been left unused for too long. It is an old project, but a new one, too, as Shulevitz also hints in summing up *Gilead* as almost “a prophecy about American literature, . . . pointing us toward a spiritual renewal after decades of ever giddier modernism, postmodernism, and moral indifference. The direction [Robinson] heads us in strikes me as hopeful and fresh, as fresh as the Bible itself,
and also slightly terrifying.” Perhaps an historian (a very brave, very humble historian) should aim to do something analogous for contemporary historical writing.

**All Scholarship is Autobiography**

I am not that historian. But, as I have worked away over the past decade or so, hoeing my own row, I have caught glimpses of some vistas where more talented gardeners might usefully venture.

The main strand of my own research illustrates the notion that all scholarship is autobiography so obviously that I do not need to describe it at length here. I have explored from a number of angles the role of Catholic literary culture in the intellectual and cultural history of twentieth-century U.S. Catholicism, especially as people involved in Catholic literary work found ways to understand and explain themselves as Catholic and American and intellectual. This concern with laying claim to an honest stake in both Catholic tradition and American credibility flowed directly from my graduate school experience of trying to find my feet in the high lonesome spaces of academia without being forced to shed the trappings of the tradition that had formed me intellectually as well as religiously. What I found when I looked in some of the more mundane byways of American Catholic literary life were a lot of people concerned with maintaining the same integration.

Like many historians, as I became more familiar with the period in which I specialized, I was drawn toward understanding more thoroughly the periods that preceded it. This was especially true in my case because the critics and teachers and interpreters of literature whom I was studying constantly invoked the past to illustrate and undergird one of their fundamental premises: that art, literary and otherwise, could no more be separated from religion than could any other aspect of human experience. This impulse was in part defensive—American Catholics, persistently dismayed at the absence of Catholics in the first ranks of American writers, harkened back to the achievement of Dante to exhort their compatriots’ efforts in service of the same high integration of religion, art, and culture. I was aware of the extent to which this perspective
diverged from standard secular accounts of American literary history. This awareness was sharpened to high relief by the experience of teaching in Florence in the summer of 2000.

A heady experience for any Americanist, these five weeks in “the cradle of the Renaissance” brought together three elements of my training and career in a way that gave rise to preoccupations I’ve been sorting out ever since. The physical encounter with the material environment of the medieval and Renaissance eras heightens a Catholic historian’s sense of the weight and depth and variability of tradition. Skills acquired years before in an ethnographically oriented American Studies graduate program that sought to understand connections among literature and politics, architecture and economy, religion and landscape were recharged and honed by being called on in a new and rich context. Most important, I was in the company of colleagues who knew and loved Florence, who delighted in ensuring that colleagues were able to adapt their disciplines and topics to take best advantage of the site, and who believed fervently in getting students out into the city as often as possible. The experience helped me to see many things differently, but one morning’s visit to the Cappella Brancacci gave rise to persisting questions about how—literally and tangibly—we see the past, and altered the focus of my work in some minor but significant ways.

The Cappella Brancacci, in the church of Santa Maria del Carmine, is one of the places in Florence where you can watch the Renaissance happen. Its frescoes of Adam and Eve and of scenes from the life of St. Peter were begun by Masolino, acknowledged master of Gothic painting, and continued by Masaccio, a younger man and the artist credited with reinventing the use of perspective in painting that is one of the hallmarks of Renaissance art. Thanks to an inattentive or generous docent, my colleague and I had an hour in the tiny space instead of the usually allotted ten minutes, and with his help I learned to see the differences in technique that differentiated one painter’s work from the other’s.

What I did not see was the difference in subject matter or emphasis that, much more than I had consciously realized beforehand, I had been expecting. I had been primed to see what various teachers and sources had told me the Renaissance represented—a turn to this world instead of the next, to identifiable individuals instead of indistinguishable masses
of souls, to "man, the measure of all things," as art historian Kenneth Clark titled the episode on the Renaissance in his 1969 BBC television series *Civilisation*, in which he describes the Masaccio frescoes as "the grandest of all testimonies to the dignity of man." I was expecting exhilarating confirmation of this dramatic shift that had ushered in the "disenchanted" world we know today, this moment in which Western civilization stopped seeing God in all things and saw only human beings, the heroic individual.

What I saw instead was a world very much charged with the grandeur of God. The fifteenth-century Florentine setting, rather than diminishing the biblical events in favor of temporal realities, rather than foregrounding the bustle of a world too busy and prosperous to realize it had left God behind, instead seemed to radiate with a conviction that the people and events of apostolic times were still present. Instead of repudiating medieval sacred timelessness, the Renaissance figures mingling with Jesus and Peter and the other apostles seemed to emphasize the presence of the divine in time. In its own idiom, it expressed a confidence as tangible as that of any medieval Coronation of Mary arraying the communion of saints past, present, and future: the confidence that eternal time is now. The eternal inhabits the temporal, the transcendent animates the local. Saint Peter walking down the streets of Florence, healing the son of Theophilus while a crowd of Florentine *cittadini* looks on, could indeed suggest civic pride and this-worldly focus. But it could just as easily be evidence of a conviction that the events of the earliest years of the church were as present, as discernible, in fifteenth-century Florence as they had been in first-century Palestine.

I left the chapel elated, but with my head whirling. Over the rest of that summer and the following year or two, I realized the experience had helped to precipitate what I can best describe as a crisis of authority. Who was I, an Americanist as both teacher and scholar, on a first trip to the continent, to think that this masterpiece of Renaissance art could refute what we are most sure we "know" about the Renaissance? One way to answer this question is to resort to pure autobiography, merely to assert that what I brought with me to the Cappella Brancacci was uniquely my own, and that my only goal in telling this story is to share my experience. Not an unworthy goal (memoir is popular for a reason),
though this approach also has a quite respectable scholarly warrant. I came late to this party, I realize. (Most of my epiphanies are like that.) I had learned and had largely been persuaded in graduate school that works of art are created as much by the viewer as by the maker, and that therefore my rendering of the frescoes' meaning was no more or less valuable or worthless than anyone else's. A defensible, even fashionable answer, but unsatisfying and a little lonesome. I am largely persuaded that meaning is contingent, but it is still an object of wonderment to me as well as a tangible catalyst for investigation that we make things mean. The processes by which "we," in all our multifarious configurations, go about doing this are discernible and documentable—classic primary source material for historians.

This is easy to say but difficult to do. It would require an entire scholarly career to responsibly examine the construction of the idea of the Renaissance in the United States, and I haven't got one to spare. Nevertheless, within my own mind this particular bell could not be unrung, and I have over the past several years attempted in limited ways to examine how the idea of the Renaissance appears and functions in the context of my work as a teacher of American Studies and an historian of American Catholic literary culture. What seems inescapable to me is the centrality of one particular data point: that this idea was largely the creation of nineteenth-century, upper-class, Anglo-American Protestants. I used to resist stating this conclusion so flatly, because it could seem to convey a tribal glee ("Take back the Renaissance!") that is far from my intention or goal. But the observation has continued to seem germane and fruitful to me, so I have pursued it, trying as much as possible to take the circumstance primarily as data, and to reflect on what it means for twentieth-century American Catholic cultural history that the pervasive American view of the Renaissance was largely formulated by American Protestants, convinced that American society was rightly secular, and that the history of civilization was to a great extent the history of humanity's overcoming of the superstition and authority-ridden docility that for them typified the Middle Ages and the dominance of the Roman church. The Renaissance was the turning point in history because it was for them entwined with the throwing off of the church's domination, especially of learning. The art of the Renaissance had to
be proven great, but had to be a human achievement aimed toward human ends.

The emerging cultural importance of the Renaissance in the nine­
teenth and early twentieth century had two interrelated strands. As a period of artistic, intellectual, and cultural flowering, the Renaissance came to occupy a central place in the historical imagination of key nineteenth-century writers and intellectuals. It was both one of the most important examples of the potential heights of human artistic achieve­ment and, increasingly, a crucial way station in a nationalist history of representative government that originated in ancient Greece and culmi­nated in the American experiment. The Renaissance also entered very literally and materially into American culture with increasing rapidity at the end of the nineteenth century when members of the burgeoning in­dustrial aristocracy began to acquire and imitate its art and architecture as markers of their own cultural arrival. In contrast to an antebellum generation that had cultivated a self-consciously plain style in decora­tive and fine arts alike, believing it to be in keeping with the egalitarian, democratic ethos of American life, the turn of the century saw Ameri­can industrial wealth invested in building castles and palazzi as private homes and public museums, furnished with paintings and frescoes and pediments and altarpieces from the churches and convents and mon­asteries and palaces of countries all over Europe, but most avidly and prestigiously from the Italy of the Renaissance.

These two strands are distinct but intertwined. One decisive con­nection is that neither the intellectuals nor the inventors can consider the Renaissance a Roman Catholic phenomenon. For the intellectuals, what makes the Renaissance important in the history of thought and politics are the seeds it plants that will grow into enlightenment and revo­lution: the recovery and translation of classical texts; the beginnings of secular political theory, separable from hierarchy and papal authority; and, as I have already noted, a perceived emphasis on the individual, the human and this-worldly, defined in contrast to the communal, religious order of medieval time. It might seem that the patrons and purchas­ers, connoisseurs and clients who made the Renaissance central to the American art market would find it more difficult to "de-Catholicize" the Renaissance, given the overwhelmingly religious subject matter of
the period. But three factors made doing so not only possible but neces­
sary. Increasing formalism in art and art theory rendered the subject
matter of a work of art increasingly irrelevant to evaluating its quality.
Simultaneously, Renaissance art was inevitably almost completely physi­
cally severed from its original contexts of worship and devotion by the
great aestheticizing museum movements of the late nineteenth and
early twentieth centuries. One aspect of context did persist, however:
because the Catholic Church was the sole (or at least the wealthiest) pa­
ton available to sponsor artistic production on the scale the greatness
of contemporary artists required, the religious content of Renaissance
art could be dismissed as an historical accident, merely a by-product of
this circumstance. The disassociation of the Renaissance from Roman
Catholicism that resulted from this combination of factors—the defi­
nition, indeed, of the Renaissance in opposition to many aspects of
Roman Catholicism—made the period and its associations available to
the American governing classes of the early twentieth century as a na­
tive cultural heritage, a lineage long and deep enough to help undergird
the emerging world-historical self-image of the United States.

I have found, as I have given sustained thought to this idea of the
Renaissance over the past few years, that I see it with the altered vision
that surprised me in the Brancacci Chapel. In ways I was not conscious
of before that day, I see as a Catholic historian—as an historian whose
skills are shaped by Catholic sensibilities as much as by methodologi­
cal training, as a Catholic preoccupied with fitting all sorts of evidence
into an ever more complex understanding of how we got from there to
here. If the Renaissance was about the discovery of the “human” and of
“reality,” is there implicit a suggestion that what came before was less
“human,” less “real”? Fully exploring the implications of these ideas, as I
have said, would require an additional scholarly career. But on the mod­
est scale of my own understanding of U.S. Catholic history in the twen­
tieth century, what the contemporary view of the Renaissance leaves out
is as suggestive as what it includes. Perhaps its most interesting irony is
that Italian art and culture were becoming central to the self-concept of
the American upper classes at the same time that actual Italian immi­
grants were coming to represent something potentially un-American.
The exponentially increasing number of immigrants from Italy to the
U.S. in the years around the turn of the twentieth century were at best primitive peasant Catholics and at worst dangerous anarchists. In either case, they were something close to the opposite of the rational, self-controlled, democratic citizen and consumer emerging as the ideal middle-class self in the early years of the twentieth century. The idea of the Renaissance served to buttress a vision of American culture that Italian immigrants—urban, working class, Catholic, much more likely to frequent nickelodeons and vaudeville shows than symphony halls and art museums—circumvented and ornamented and eventually largely disregarded in the years immediately following the First World War.

To be fair, it was in some sense uniquely possible at the beginning of the twentieth century to dissociate the idea of Italy from Roman Catholicism, because at its establishment a half century earlier the Italian state had decisively rejected Vatican control over Italian politics. Italy in this historical moment stood at last with the other nations of Europe in espousing representative secular government and equating hierarchical authority with a primitive past that modern nations and modern individuals needed to reject. The Pope, an anachronistic monarchical figure imprisoned in the Vatican, was both threatening and impotent, insidious and ridiculous. His position confirmed for upper-class Americans who were claiming the Renaissance as their own intellectual, artistic, and cultural heritage that the country in which it had originated had not brought it to fruition. Americans, then, could be its rightful heirs and stewards.

I am intrigued by the likelihood that this idea of the Renaissance was an important component in defining American Catholics out of mainstream U.S. intellectual culture in the early and middle years of the twentieth century. By locating the importance of the Renaissance in values that could be separated from—and, in fact, defined against—Roman Catholicism, and then traced in a clear trajectory that led inexorably to Harvard in 1900, the American intellectual and cultural elite could incorporate the heritage of Europe and of Western civilization into its own self-understanding without having to address Roman Catholicism as anything other than a dying, irrelevant polity. It did not have to be met as an intellectual equal.
Engaging Roman Catholicism as an intellectual tradition in the early twentieth century would have required mending one of the defining breaches in modern intellectual life—that between theology and philosophy. Philosophy had endured in the Western academy as a viable intellectual enterprise; theology, except within divinity schools and seminaries, had been defined out of an increasingly scientized intellectual landscape. To the extent that it remained a legitimate subject for scholarly study, theology was translated into "religion," and disaggregated into component sociological factors such as class, race, gender, region, ethnic identity, and political affiliation, which then could be approached using the methods of social science. But this is the rough equivalent of looking at the frescoes in the Brancacci Chapel and seeing only pigment and form and technique. Among many other things, the doctrine of the Incarnation is an idea, and, as with so many other fundamental organizing ideas at the center of complex systems, our view of it literally changes what we see when we look at the past and its traces. In other words, whether you believe in the Incarnation affects how you read evidence. Whether this is a good thing or a bad thing I do not know, but trying to be conscious of it and to communicate honestly about it is, I think, one of the more interesting contemporary intellectual tasks of the believing historian.

Mending the breach between philosophy and theology is not part of an historian's job description (for which I am sure most philosophers and theologians are grateful). But we—that is, believing historians interested in investigating not "religion" but living religious traditions, communities existing inside and outside of time, using the tools of the historian but maintaining a humble sense of their limits—could do a better job than we have done of tracing the causes and consequences of the breach, and asking some pointed questions about what data and evidence it has caused us and our colleagues to overlook. Another Renaissance touchstone is Raphael's 1509 fresco *The School of Athens*, the familiar image of Plato and Aristotle at the center of an array of philosophers, a quintessential celebration of the power and long tradition of human reason. What is virtually forgotten is that the *School of Athens* stands opposite the *Disputa*, or the Disputation of the Holy Sacrament.
At the center of this fresco is the Eucharistic host in a monstrance, surrounded by members of the Church Militant and the Church Triumphant, with an exultant resurrected Christ reigning amidst depictions of the other persons of the Trinity. In other words, in its original context The School of Athens’ celebration of the power of human reason is and must be complemented and accompanied by the communal, timeless, sacramental celebration of what is beyond reason. The loss of this context is strikingly evident even in the original space itself: it is possible to stand and watch tour groups pour into the room, be pointed by their guides toward The School of Athens for a few words about the fresco’s most famous features, then be ushered out of the door opposite without ever turning an eye toward the Disputa. Simply turning around and seeing what lies behind us, mindful of what we share with but how we differ from those who have stood in our footsteps before, is a probably inexhaustible method for enriching our sense of past, present, and future.

**History as Sacrament**

A sustained reexamination of the visual (and other) evidence of the Renaissance with the integrated mind that keeps philosophy and theology as partners reveals many forgotten connections and contexts. It presents, however, perhaps especially to a Catholic historian, a specific temptation, one that I think historians have to resist, even when its lure seems particularly honorable. It illuminates and, I believe, more fully serves the available evidence to see the Renaissance not as the occasion of a radical break with a premodern, medieval past, but instead as one episode of a still-continuing drama within which the relationships between church and world, communal and individual, sacred and profane, continually reconfigure. But this very emphasis on continuity can be an opening to the temptation inherent in seeing things *sub specie aeternitatis*: seeing everything worldly in the light of eternity can seem to diminish the importance of examining and understanding and arguing about how things change over time. If everything matters ultimately, does anything matter very much in any one moment? Do the things
we argue over most vociferously as historians have any resonance at all when we see them in light of tradition, belief, and revelation?

If I thought they did not, I would no longer be an historian. But I have been thinking about what it is, precisely, that helped form in me this sensibility that historical events and actors matter. One very likely answer is the experience of liturgy, the sustained and continually revived realization that repetition is an occasion for renewed understanding and depth, not simple reoccurrence. The Eucharist, weekly and daily, has been perhaps the most consistent aspect of my life for nearly forty years. I have been struck in my research on twentieth-century Catholic intellectual life how little Catholics write about the presence and the experience of the sacraments. I am convinced, though, that this lack of explicit reflection is not evidence of the unimportance of the sacraments in Catholic intellectual life. Instead, I think their importance is too dense, too pervasive, and too implicit, too dependent on things beyond and outside of words, to be conveyed easily or, in most cases, effectively. So, in trying to convey how the integration between studying history and living the Christian tradition deepens over time, I need to try to describe my hearing the gospel of the raising of Lazarus proclaimed during the 2006 Lenten season.

It might have been the first time I had ever heard it, the story seemed so strange and powerful to me. That strangeness is a hallmark of John’s gospel, and in reflecting on the story I am not trying to dispel the strangeness or explain it away. One aspect of the account did seem to go beyond strange and become troubling, the more I thought about it. Jesus’s reply to the initial report of Lazarus’s illness is, “This illness is not to end in death, but is for the glory of God, that the Son of God may be glorified through it” (Jn 11:4). He then waits two days before setting off for Bethany, saying to the apostles as they leave, “Our friend Lazarus is asleep, but I am going to awaken him” (11). When the apostles mistake this for the healing sleep of recuperation, Jesus spells it out: “Lazarus has died. And I am glad for you that I was not there, that you may believe. Let us go to him” (14–15). The deception here seems gratuitous; the delay in hastening to Lazarus’s deathbed deliberately cruel. The dimness and misunderstanding of the apostles frequently present occasions for Jesus’s teaching in John’s gospel, and the goal of God’s glory and their
belief might make their feelings seem puny by comparison. I hope I am not simply trying to evade a hard teaching, though, when I say that this explanation was not satisfying to me. And, as I puzzled through how the story moves from its beginning to its end, I found myself propelled deeply into a new awareness of the grace of thinking historically, of thinking about events as succeeding one another in time, so that what happens next can be something that never happened before.

The story's discomfiting details took on a different resonance when I began to think of its events as really occurring in time. Of course, the gospels, and the gospel of John especially, present post-resurrection understandings of who Jesus is, the result of the experience and reflection of the early Christian communities. But wouldn't a full post-resurrection understanding (if there could be such a thing) need to encompass some existential, visceral awareness of what could possibly be at stake in being in the presence of someone with power over death? Would Jesus himself be hesitating over the implications and consequences of the situation? Pondering why Jesus says this illness is not to end in death—is it possible he himself, in the moment, did not know what that meant? That he himself learned something about his capacity not just to heal but to restore life, to conquer death, in the process of this experience?

Martha confronts Jesus with the hard results of his delay in coming: my brother would not have died. But, she also declares quite straightforwardly her confidence that whatever Jesus asks, God will grant. She meets Jesus's assertion that her brother will rise by affirming her belief in the resurrection on the last day. And, in response to Jesus's reply that he is the resurrection, she names him as Messiah. What remains ambiguous here is at what point the raising of Lazarus shifts from then to now, from the eschatological horizon to the present moment. One possibility is that when Martha affirms Jesus as Messiah, and the moment approaches in which all his foreknowledge will come to fruition, the connection between resurrection and eternal life on the one hand, and mortal life, life in time, on the other, takes on an enormity it had not had for him before.

This realization may help illuminate another of the story's great mysteries, the depth of Jesus's emotion. While most translations soften the verb to "perturbed" or "troubled in spirit," commentaries make clear
that in the original Greek the word is very strong. And as he takes in the
reality of Lazarus’s death, it seems, Jesus himself weeps. If he knew that
“this illness is not to end in death,” and that its point is that God may be
glorified, why is his emotion so deep? I cannot pretend to answer this
question adequately, but what I have been pondering since hearing this
gospel anew is that, at the center of this moment right before the events
on which history as we in the West define it pivots, we find human love,
and we find the finality of time.

To love other human beings as humans love must be as different
from loving as God loves as being human is from being divine. Jesus
presumably experienced both together in some way, and maybe this ex­
perience is his realization of the possibility, the meaning, the feeling of
their sundering. Jesus, as human, could here be mourning Lazarus, but
he could also be mourning his own solidarity with all these people, his
having to give over the sweetness and comfort of human presence for
the alien grandeur of the capacity to defeat death. The three references
to Jesus’s deep emotions reverberate with the enormity of the moment
when that capacity takes effect in human history.

The story highlights the extent to which being human means being
a creature in time. For Jesus to love humans as humans, as he loved
Martha, Mary, and Lazarus, the beauty of being a creature in time must
have been apparent to him, must have been one of the most distinc­
tive aspects of his experience of life on earth. Loving humans as human
means also, of course, knowing the inconsolable loss of human presence
in time that death brings about, and Jesus himself would not yet have
known what that meant as a human being.

What seems clear to me from all of this is that when we press the
gospel’s focus on the glory of God and the importance of our belief to its
crucial moments, we find, not that the ordinary connections and events
of human experience diminish in their particularity and importance,
but that they are in their very specificity and lovableness the gateways
to the ultimate. If this is so, it would seem to have some very concrete
implications for how Christians think of themselves as historians. That
historians are charged with helping society to think about the way in
which human experience unfolds in time means living at the center
of this mystery during the most mundane bibliography-compiling,
citation-checking, draft-revising historical work. Nothing we do as a scholar or teacher or citizen takes place outside this horizon, apart from this reality of being created in time for a life outside of time. Everything we do that increases a sense of wonder about the smallest detail of this picture is of ultimate importance. A deepening identification with the reality of the past and the humanity of its inhabitants is indispensable and mutually enriching to the practice of a tradition that makes historical claims.

**History as Mystery**

Everything I have written here could be simply a gloss on one of the most interesting lines in Flannery O'Connor's letters: "Mystery isn't something that is gradually evaporating. It grows along with knowledge." When I first read O'Connor's letters over twenty years ago, I identified less with her than with the young recipient of this observation, nineteen-year-old Alfred Corn, who had written in the spring of 1962 expressing his anxieties over whether a university education made it impossible to have religious faith. In her reply, O'Connor refutes Corn's apparent speculation about the extent to which the behavior of O'Connor's characters is determined. A determined world, O'Connor makes clear, would be a much less interesting one. In my attempt here to articulate the way by which I have come, so far, in understanding myself and my work as a Catholic historian, I have been reminded that the whole thing is much more mysterious to me now than it was when I started. Not the first time Flannery O'Connor has told me something about myself long before I knew it.

Pleading mystery is a legendary Catholic cop-out, of course, but that does not free the writer from the obligation to be clear about where the boundaries of the mystery lie. Before we come anywhere near standing still in mystic contemplation, we have a lot of work to do. Not that it is a bad thing for reflection on personal experience to yield some pragmatic historical and historiographical questions. If the results of these experiences remained only personal, they would be narcissistic flotsam, not even rising to the level of autobiography. And the tasks that emerge
from reconsidering the place of religious traditions in the past century-and-a-half of historical scholarship, while not innovative, are nonetheless radical, in that they ask us to return once again to the roots of the profession, and to speak in some very fundamental ways to the profession as a whole, not only to those who share our beliefs about the world. But, in the end, mystery itself is not, in some sense, mysterious, if by “mysterious” we mean something that tries to keep itself from us, keep us guessing and stumbling. Instead, mystery is very near, always waiting to ambush us, in the most mundane of our tasks, because we deal with the stuff of which the gracious mystery at the heart of the world is made.

**Notes**


3. Bill Moyers, in *The Power of the Past*, asks of an art historian in the Brancacci Chapel, “This reality, this discovery of reality was new and radical for that time, wasn’t it?”