

BOOK REVIEW FORUM

Among All the Nations

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I spent much of the first decade of the 2000s writing a book about the Catholic Church in nineteenth and twentieth-century Vietnam. I came to the topic as a scholar of Vietnam, and very much not as a scholar of modern Catholicism. In the project's early stages I searched high and low for a general history to fill in the (many) gaps in my knowledge of the subject. The best I could find was Nicholas Atkin and Frank Tallett's 2003 *Priests, Prelates & People: A History of European Catholicism since 1750*. This book, although excellent and still worth reading, is squarely grounded in scholarship written from an older national and regional approach to the Church's modern history. It essentially ignores the fact that in the modern era more than ever before, Catholicism's historical epicenter in Europe was irreducibly tied to the rest of the world not only through the Ultramontane Church but also through the circulation of ideas and the printed word, migration, and (above all) European imperialism, and that the Church's institutional and cultural evolution since the eighteenth century is incomprehensible outside of such frameworks (Atkin and Tallett devote an astounding 5 of their 333 pages of text to the European empires in Latin America, Africa, and Asia, which made up two-thirds of the global Catholic population at the time they finished their book).

Twenty years later, John T. McGreevy's *Catholicism: A Global History from the French Revolution to Pope Francis* synthesizes a generation of scholarship on Church history grounded first and foremost in transnational and global approaches and methodologies, much of it drawing from archives (from Rome to the Global South) only recently made available. The result is not only up to date: it is also insightful, lively, and timely. Among its other strengths, it humanizes its sweeping story with well-chosen biographical portraits, and it engages sensitively with the litany of difficult issues that the Church and its believers have faced in recent years: the Church's role in human enslavement and the Holocaust, debates over priestly celibacy and issues of gender and sexuality in Church life, birth control and abortion, and the epidemic of sexual abuse within the Church's ranks. Unlike my own somewhat frustrating search twenty years ago for a good general history of global Catholicism, those looking for one today are in luck.

One evident, if perhaps understated, line of demarcation exists in McGreevy's global portrait of the modern Church. Eight of the ten chapters that make up the first two of the book's three sections center on the Church's (for lack of a better word) "Euro-American" world. Before the nineteenth century, Catholicism's presence in the

Americas was inextricable from European imperialism. But thereafter, the empire's deep legacies notwithstanding, the two world regions bore basic similarities—independent nation-states with populations that were majority Christian (most often Catholic), and deeply linked through the nineteenth century's mass migrations—that beg for a transnational approach often absent in other general Church histories. Here, McGreevy's narrative, although always attuned to the crucial particularities, takes us from Poland to Peru to explore the Church's shared modern history in Europe and the Americas: the shock of Atlantic Revolutions and the Ultramontane response, the institutional and cultural competition between the Church and nation-states, Catholic visions of—or opposition to—liberal politics, Catholic mass popular culture, and Catholic modernity in intellectual and artistic life. I suspect that for most general readers, the main revelation in these chapters of the book will be the parallels and continuities between the Church's modern history in Europe (and the United States) and in Latin America, a region often conceived as part of the “Global South” in other world histories.

The “Global South” is McGreevy's principal focus in the two other chapters of Parts I and II of the book. Here, a different narrative unfolds, one in which a missionary revival after the French Revolution intersected with the rise of European imperialism in Asia and Africa later in the nineteenth century to transform Catholic communities that, though often centuries-old, had remained largely autonomous from—at times wholly separate from—European Catholic culture and institutions. The Ultramontane Church's growing presence in Asia and Africa was complex: missionaries were a welcome link to the Church's global devotional culture and its resources, but European Catholics often arrived with dismissive (often racist) ideas and a general acceptance of—at times cooperation with—exploitative imperial projects. By the 1920s, the shock of the Great War, alarming demographic changes in European Catholic life, and (above all) growing appeals from Asian and African Catholics for independent Churches of their own—inseparable from the nationalist movements in the colonized world at that time—produced a seismic change in Rome, which began not only preparing for but cultivating what could be called the “decolonization” of the Church in Asia and Africa. When political decolonization came to Asia and Africa between the 1940s and the 1960s, it set off a competition between nascent independent Churches and nation-states in these regions that echoed the history of nineteenth-century Europe; in Asia and Africa, however, Catholics were nearly always small minorities in political and cultural contexts often hostile to their presence. A parallel decolonial struggle also unfolded in Latin America in the Cold War, which divided Catholic supporters of American-aligned authoritarian regimes with their Catholic opponents, organized around left-wing (sometimes avowedly Marxist) Catholic political ideas with, again, parallels to Europe (in this case, its postwar Christian Democracy).

McGreevy's two narratives converge in the book's third and final section. The hinge is, unsurprisingly, the Second Vatican Council, recounted here in a gripping chapter that explains the event's simultaneously deep roots and revolutionary ruptures. The post-Vatican Two global Church, if unified through an official shift to a vernacularizing, laicizing Church, bore new fault lines: ecumenism and religious liberty versus its opponents, anti-communist Catholics and the smaller but vibrant global Catholic left, and division on the era's dominant sociocultural issues (divorce, birth control and abortion, gender roles, and the like). But unlike in the earlier periods explored in this book, the divisions within the Church after Vatican Two no longer had as clear a geographic character to them, particularly after the end of the Cold War

wiped out communist regimes in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe and Latin American authoritarianism faded. The charismatic John Paul II's twenty-six-year papacy both reflected and reinforced an ever-more interconnected post-Cold War Church in its generally positive view of capitalism and its rejection of authoritarian politics on both right and left; further, it intensified engagement with Catholicism in the world outside the West, commitment to human rights, defensive posture against progressive currents in Church life, and—tragically—complicity in the sexual abuse scandals whose legacies the global Church is still reckoning with today.

McGreevy's book is inarguably a global history, and a very good one. But in my view, it misses an opportunity to better explain perhaps the most crucial transformation in the Church's modern history: from a Church two-thirds of whose followers were European in at the turn of the twentieth century, to one two-thirds of whose followers were Asian and African a century later. A global history of the Church more closely centered on its twenty-first-century heartland would, by necessity, demand a periodization different from McGreevy's, which remains squarely in line with Western-centric historiography. It would begin with Catholicism's arrival and first centuries in Asia and Africa, instead of introducing these world regions to the story (as McGreevy largely does) with the missionary revival and nineteenth-century imperialism. It would meaningfully explain how, in his words, "only determined efforts by native Christians ensured the persistence of Catholic communities" (45) in these regions before the second half of the nineteenth century. Doing so would, in my view, require a closer focus on the deeper history of uniquely Asian and African forms of Catholicism: their inculturation, social structures, forms of popular piety, theologies, and the like. To a certain extent, this might be an unfair critique. A global history of the Church that explores McGreevy's core themes (modern politics, ultramontanist, migration, imperialism, etc.)—not only defensible but essential—is well-served by his periodization and general approach. In some historiographical frameworks for Church history, all roads *should* lead to Rome. Moreover, despite a sea change in the scholarship on the Catholic Church's modern history, it remains heavily imbalanced in favor of European and American contexts. As such, this closing point is perhaps less a critique than simply an effort to situate John McGreevy's excellent book relative not only to what came before it, but also to what will hopefully come after it.