Robert E. Alvis

White Eagle, Black Madonna: One Thousand Years of the Polish Catholic Tradition.
New York: Fordham University Press, 2016. Pp. xv + 368. Pb, \$35.

Robert Alvis's *White Eagle, Black Madonna: One Thousand Years of the Polish Catholic Tradition*, promises to provide "an evenhanded, scholarly assessment" of a millennium of Polish Catholicism. The author has more than met his goal, and his coverage of his subject is exceptionally well done. The book examines the complex and diverse ways that Catholics—bishops, priests, and laity—responded to the major events and developments in Polish history. It provides insightful, balanced, and nuanced discussions of crucial issues such as the church under the Partitions, during the Second World War, and under Communism. Alvis gives convincing and comprehensive explanations for some of the major developments in Polish Catholic history, such as: (1) why Poles were attracted to Protestantism during the Reformation and then back to Catholicism again; (2) how the church maneuvered during the Communist period; and (3) why its prestige and authority declined in the 1990s. He does an especially good job in presenting and critiquing the Enlightenment narrative regarding religion and progress. The book is up-to-date and well-researched, taking care to incorporate the most recent scholarship from Poland. Avoiding jargon, it is accessible to the layperson, while also useful to scholars and historians—especially those church historians who would like to learn more about Poland and seek a broader perspective for understanding their own periods of specialization. Alvis's decision to discuss historical periods and developments quite distant from his own area of specialization (modern Polish history) and the skill with which he does this is commendable. The book is also exceptionally well-written.

Among the book's many strengths is its structure. Alvis has organized his study in a very effective manner. Each chapter is launched by the recounting of a major event from Poland's history that introduces and connects with the themes of the ensuing chapter, and which collectively show the richness and variety of the intersections between Poland's history and its traditionally dominant faith—the baptism of Mieszko in 966; the momentous marriages of Hedwig of Andechs in 1186 and Jadwiga of Anjou in 1386; the Sejm's declaration of religious tolerance of 1573; King Jan Kazimierz's oath of devotion to the Blessed Virgin as Queen of Poland in 1656; the foundation of the Confederation of Bar in defense of Poland in 1768; the reburial of the great poet Adam Mickiewicz at Wawel Cathedral in 1890; the martyrdoms of Maximilian Kolbe at Auschwitz in 1941 and of Father Jerzy Popiełuszko by secret police agents in 1984; and the plane crash of 2010 near Smolensk, killing Poland's President Lech Kaczyński

and ninety-five others on their way to commemorate the seventieth anniversary of the Katyń forest massacre of Polish officers by Stalin's NKVD. Each chapter then presents the broader international and domestic contexts of the period, subsequently moves on to a discussion of the institutional Church, and finally concludes by looking at the lived experiences of Polish Catholics at the time.

Other aspects of the book also stand out. Alvis incorporates architecture into his narrative in ways that enhance our understanding of pertinent historical and cultural developments. He discusses examples ranging from the transition from Romanesque to Gothic in the Middle Ages to Stanisław Wyspiański's nineteenth-century art nouveau redesign of Kraków's Basilica of Saint Francis to Nowa Huta's Church of the Ark from the 1970s. Moreover, Alvis includes some coverage of the Polish diaspora in America, especially in Chicago, adding another interesting dimension to his study. Finally, he includes in each chapter accounts of eminent persons from Polish history that illustrate the broader historical developments and serve to engage the reader with the material on a more personal level. For example, for the nineteenth century we learn of bishops and clergy who advocated loyalty to the Habsburgs, promoted the temperance movement, and advanced the social Catholicism of Pope Leo XIII. Alvis also gives extensive coverage to the development of piety among Poland's Catholics, including medieval cults of the saints, the Kalwaria shrines of the Catholic Reformation, Easter folk traditions, and the growth of the Divine Mercy devotion of Faustyna Kowalska and modern lay ecclesial movements such as Oasis and Focolare.

Alvis's work pays due attention to the Society of Jesus. Invited to Poland in 1564, Jesuits had established thirty-two colleges and grew to 1,390 members by 1648. Their superior educational institutions not only trained thousands of young men for important positions in church and society, but also attracted Protestant students who often converted to Catholicism on account of a Jesuit education. Alvis gives attention to the great Polish Jesuits Piotr Skarga (1536–1612), close advisor to the king, champion of Catholicism against non-Catholics, and author of major spiritual works, and St. Andrzej Bobola (1591–1657), a missionary martyred by Cossacks in 1657. Alvis also features the Jesuit Church of Saints Peter and Paul in Kraków as an example of early Polish baroque, and notes the Jesuit role in promoting devotions to the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus in Poland, both in the early modern period, and in the twentieth century through the hugely popular Apostolate of Prayer.

Perhaps most importantly, Alvis has a voice the reader can trust. His is an even-handed and balanced approach, not only in his discussion of Catholic relations with Poland's religious minorities (Protestant, Orthodox, Eastern Rite, Jewish), but in examining the contentious issues between Polish Catho-

lics themselves. He approaches topics such as the church's role under Communism, or Catholic anti-Semitism, with great nuance and sensitivity to context. He also takes a very thoughtful approach to the relationship between myth and reality that comes up repeatedly throughout history. He does not hesitate to challenge dominant Polish Catholic narratives, and give criticism where due, but always in a constructive manner and an exemplary spirit of generosity.

Robert Alvis's *White Eagle, Black Madonna* is a pleasure to read. It is a rich and insightful survey of a crucial dimension of Poland's history. The general reader will find it engaging and informative, and even a reader well-versed in Polish church history will learn much of worth and insight from it. To anyone interested in the history of Catholicism in Poland, this is the first book I would recommend.

James Ramon Felak

University of Washington

felak@uw.edu

DOI 10.1163/22141332-00501008-05