
Dr. Smith’s new work is a highly readable and painstaking attempt to unravel and understand a complex phenomenon: the “Catholicization” of American Protestant worship in the mid-nineteenth century. Today, gothic tracery, stained glass, and elegant choir vestments are standard and uncontroversial staples of church life across the denominations. However, their current “given” status belies a half forgotten, bitter struggle marked by extraordinary acts of cognitive dissonance and marred by ugly sectarian propaganda.

The book’s central contention is that Protestant moves towards the Gothic in setting and the Catholic in liturgy have to be read fundamentally (and paradoxically) as part of the story of anti-Catholicism; they do not indicate a softening of ecumenical attitudes. Between 1820 and 1860 the number of Roman Catholics in the USA swelled enormously, primarily through immigration, to become the largest single denomination (though still a minority). The rise in Catholic population was accompanied by an exponential increase (1096%) in Roman Catholic church building between 1820 and 1860. This construction program mainly used Gothic forms redolent of medieval Catholicism’s hegemony and vitality in order to augment contemporary Catholic identity. The most striking and deservedly famous example is perhaps Saint Patrick’s Cathedral in New York City. Begun in 1858, its massive frame occupies a whole city block and cost one million dollars to complete over thirty years. It and its counterparts in other American cities made Roman Catholicism’s presence highly visible to the country’s wary, and predominantly non-Catholic, population.

Early responses, such as the nativist burning of Philadelphia’s Catholic churches in 1844 mirrored Reformation hostilities. However, exposure to the richness of Catholic art and worship caused some evangelical Christians to consider whether their traditions had unjustly neglected the beauty of holiness. Acting upon pre-dispositions towards aesthetic refinement created by increasing prosperity and romantic medievalism this led to a phased and sanitized adoption of once suspect forms. First the Latin cross (but not the crucifix), followed by pointed arches, and finally altar flowers, robes, and the like made their way into impeccably reformed contexts. Such “popish” moves did not go uncontested by traditionalist voices. In 1855
the Presbyterian Princeton Review warned strongly against imitating “the old cathedrals, designed in sin, founded in iniquity… the monuments of idolatry and tyranny” and it was not alone. Yet such objections came to be trumped by the realization that if Protestants did not make use of forms that were, of themselves, either good or indifferent they risked the worse possibility of losing adherents to Roman “perversion.”

The cross (for obvious reasons) made the transition most readily: “why should we allow the mother of abominations to monopolize every symbol and beautiful token of our holy Christianity” asked one mid-century Methodist commentator. Gothic architecture and richer liturgical practice had a harder time gaining acceptance. Some proponents tried to circumvent Gothic’s suspect medieval Catholic associations by constructing elaborately fanciful origins, claiming it to be the style of early Christian Palestine or even Solomon’s temple. Most, though, were more pragmatic: “If you want to get Martins about your House, you must put up a Martin box,” pleaded the Congregationalist minister Lyman Beecher in 1852.

Smith clearly and persuasively argues all of the above in five principal chapters and an epilogue drawing out some perennial themes in American denominational identity and the lasting impact of the nineteenth-century controversies. His volume is methodologically impressive in the way it draws analysis of material and visual culture into the heart of an historical study. It is likewise adept at teasing out the nuances of and variations within the Protestant appropriations (e.g., the distinct dynamics of Lutheran and Episcopalian traditions are well handled) and much interesting but overlooked material and information is brought into view.

However, the book disappoints readers in a number of conceptual and technical respects. There is, for instance, a definite lack of assurance in handling theological ideas. This is most evident in the sometimes confused use of doctrinal shorthands, e.g., the author’s assertion that “Protestant Theology… denied any special divine presence in the sacraments” would have come as a considerable surprise to Calvin, let alone Luther. Moreover, though the presenting data often suggests interesting avenues for a substantial re-assessment of “the Protestant Aesthetic,” the opportunity is not grasped. We are told of Evangelical objections to the “sensuality” of Catholic worship, but those objections are not contextualized within the Reformed tradition’s lacuna around the doctrine of creation; nor is any thorough explanation given of how they were met by iconophilic American Protestants. Similarly, works like A. L. Drummond’s classic, The Church Architecture of Protestantism (T. & T. Clarke, 1934), are referenced but