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Commissioned by Anna Muller (University of Michigan - Dearborn)

In recent years, the topic of the Catholic Church in Poland has received well-deserved attention in English-language historiography. Robert E. Alvis’s newest book, *White Eagle, Black Madonna: One Thousand Years of the Polish Catholic Tradition*, is a wonderful contribution to this growing body of historical literature. In ten sweeping chapters, Alvis documents chronologically the development of the Catholic Church in the historic Polish lands, from the baptism of Archduke Mieszko I in 966 to the 2010 controversial burial of President Lech Kaczyński in the Wawel crypt. Masterfully written, with remarkable depth and erudition, *White Eagle, Black Madonna* is a stunning synthesis of the most recent research on Poland, the Catholic Church, and their shared history.

In the preface, Alvis promises a book that “is more than a chronological account of what Polish Catholics have experienced and accomplished.” Fulfilling this promise, he offers a commentary on the Polish Catholic tradition that “continuously adds dimensions to the meaning of church and informs Catholic belief and praxis in the present” (p. xii). In doing so, Alvis is able to demonstrate how historical events in the Catholic history of Poland continue to resonate with the faithful today. Each chapter follows a consistent pattern, beginning first with an anecdote to grasp the reader’s attention, then an overview of changes in Polish and church policy and history, and finally ending with a discussion of how Catholics lived these events.

One of Alvis’s major contentions is that the church has been a unifying force in Poland for much of its history. In the state’s earliest years, through much turmoil, including a nearly two-century period of fragmentation (1138-1314), it was the Polish church and its growing networks of religious and social power that managed to provide badly needed structure and unity for a divided Poland. During the period of the Reformation, however, the authority of the church declined as Polish nobles turned to Protestantism. That the Polish state legislated tolerance toward Protestants and other religious minorities, in par-
ticular Jews, was not a sign of state benevolence, Alvis argues, but rather an attempt for nobles to wield their enormous political power over religious authorities. This religious tolerance, Alvis shows, began to wane as the Polish state declined during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. During the seventeenth century, when Orthodox Cossacks and Swedish Protestants attacked the Polish lands, Poles associated these non-Catholic peoples with violence, leading the way for limited religious toleration and a stronger Catholic presence among the upper echelon of Polish-speaking society.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Catholicism and Polishness became increasingly synonymous with one another. To exemplify the growing ties between the church and nation, Alvis uses the anti-Semitic National Democratic Party, which enjoyed the support of many Catholic clergy, to show how the church helped exacerbate ethnic tensions from the pulpit. In his discussion of the period of state socialism, Alvis demonstrates how the church sought to unify the faithful in eventually rising against the Communist Party. Bolstered by Cardinals Stefan Wyszyński and Karol Wojtyła (Pope John Paul II as of his election to the pontificate in 1978), the Catholic Church posed a central threat to the atheist Communist regime. But the church’s unifying spirit, Alvis suggests, has diminished since the collapse of Communism. In part because of globalizing factors and internal political debates, Polish society has become increasingly polarized in the thirty years since the inception of the Third Republic. That Polish church leaders have opted to partake in these debates and have aligned themselves so closely with the Law and Justice Party is for Alvis an aberration of the church’s tradition. In concluding White Eagle, Black Madonna he writes, “The defensiveness and insularity that has marked the Polish church in the modern era stands very much at odds with its earlier legacy as a conduit linking Poland to the wider Christian world” (pp. 276-277).

Historians of Poland will find that much of the book’s lessons are familiar, and I often found myself wanting to learn more about the faithful than church and political leaders, but beyond these minor criticisms, the book is superb. In addition to its excellent analysis, it will prove an important teaching tool in the classroom, and I have already revised my lectures in Polish history to reflect Alvis’s findings. Balanced and nuanced, White Eagle, Black Madonna deserves a wide readership from students and scholars of Poland, religious history, and the history of Catholicism.

Note

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