Making Religion Real: Historians' Constructions of American Catholicism in the Nineteenth-Century West

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Working with my colleague, Roberta Brown, on the Blanchet letter press books has intensified both my frustration and my fascination with the task of trying to construct and interpret the history of the Catholic Church in the Pacific Northwest as part of a larger project of writing a history of religiousness in the region. The Blanchet project is significant in its own right as a valuable resource for historians of ecclesiastical institutions and missions. The project's value extends far beyond this however. Blanchet's letters make abundantly clear how much more complex the story of Catholicism in the region is than the dominant narratives of the Church's expansion in what will be the Western United States indicate.

In this brief essay I will first discuss the omission of the story of the development of the Catholic Church in the Oregon Country from most US historical narratives and how its absence is connected to the structural characteristics of the dominant US narratives of secular and religious history.I am limited to US sources because of difficulty getting Canadian sources.(It is amazing that the US-Canadian border is so permeable for some things and so impermeable for others, including scholarly texts!) Second, by using the Blanchet correspondence I will discuss problems with the dominant narratives and what a history beginning with the French-Canadian experience in the Oregon Country can contribute to our understanding of Catholicism in the United States. Finally, I will close with some comments on the significance of borderland studies for religious

history.

Three themes dominate US narratives of Roman Catholicism in the West: 1) absence; 2) a relentless east to west trajectory that is coupled with an entrenched English/US master story; and, 3) in those narratives that do address the Pacific Northwest, a single organizing metaphor–the battle to establish and maintain ecclesiastical presence.

General Absence of the Pacific Northwest and of Religion in Narratives of the West

Total absence or cursory mention characterizes treatments of the Roman Catholic Church in the Far West and especially the Pacific Northwest in secular histories of the United States. This absence has persisted in what is referred to as the "new Western History"represented in the works of scholars such as Patricia Nelson Limerick, Richard White, and Clyde A. Milner.[1] D. Michael Quinn's "Religion in the American West" stands out for addressing religion as a topic in its own right and not as an intrusive but necessary tangential addition to ethnic or community studies.[2]

Catholicism in the Pacific Northwest is absent in religious histories of the United States as well. The only reference to the early history of Catholicism in the Oregon Country that I could find in any general history of US religion was in Sydney Ahlstrom's *A Religious History of the American People*. Ahlstrom notes:"In 1846, at a time when the Oregon question was still unsettled, a new stage in American hierarchical history was reached. A second metropolitan see was erected with the French-Canadian Francis N. Blanchet as archbishop, his brother as suffragan in Walla Walla, and another French-Canadian as bishop of Vancouver. In both fact and theory this province was at first an extension of the Canadian Church."[3]

Save for Ahlstrom's brief mention, why the absence? The answer falls into two parts. First, historical fate. Second, the standard or consensus narrative structure used for the religious and social/political history of the United States. Historical fate, first.

The Apostolic Vicariate and later Ecclesiastical Province that included the Oregon Country, or Columbia District as it was called by the Hudson's Bay Company, came into being during a fluid time on the North American and world scene. It was carved out of the Ecclesial Province of

Quebec which covered three million square miles, an area larger than all of Europe with a Catholic population of a little over 200,000. Francois Norbert Blanchet and Modeste Demers were sent to the mission of the Columbia in 1837. In December 1843 the mission was made an Apostolic Vicariate that included the area between the Rocky Mountains to the East, the Mexican and later US border to the south, the Pacific Ocean to the West, and the Arctic Pole to the north. Francois Norbert Blanchet did not find out about the action or that he had been made bishop of the area for a year.[4]

Blanchet's Apostolic Vicariate was made into the Ecclesiastical Province of Oregon in 1846 with Blanchet appointed to the archiepiscopal see of Oregon City. Modeste Demers was assigned the diocese of Vancouver Island and Francois Norbert's brother, Augustin Magliore Alexandre Blanchet was assigned to the diocese of Walla Walla. Five other districts, potential dioceses, were named: Nesqually, Fort Hall, Colville, Princess Charlotte, and New Caledonia. Oregon was the second Ecclesiastical Province established in what is now the United States. All this for an area that, by F.N. Blanchet's own reckoning, included only 6,000 Catholics, the majority of whom were Native Americans.[5] While this number of souls was significant for the Blanchets and their compatriots it was not so for English and Yankees.

What then leads to the historical oblivion of the early story of the Catholic Church in this region? For one thing, the area was sparsely populated, difficult to reach, and without obvious value. The story of the church here has been deemed insignificant in comparison to other political, social and ecclesial locations and events of the same time.

Perhaps the most significant act that fated the early history of the Catholic Church in the Oregon Country to oblivion was the settlement of the boundary dispute between Great Britain and the United States over the Columbia District or Oregon Country. The Province of Oregon came into existence coterminously with this settlement. The treaty of June 1846 (ratified by the US Senate in July 1846) established the boundary between the United States and Great Britain at the 49th parallel. That treaty, coupled with the Hudson's Bay Company decision of the previous year to move its headquarters to Vancouver Island from Fort Vancouver, left the struggling, young, largely French Catholic Church without the political and economic tolerance that it had enjoyed for its first nine years.

The boundary settlement created difficulties for the Catholic Church

in the Pacific Northwest, a church primarily Native America, French-Canadian, Metis, and missionary in character. For one thing, the Ecclesiastical Province crossed international boundaries and so had to contend with different relationships between church and state. For another, the bishops now had to deal with the Oregon Provisional Government, adamantly US Protestant and rabidly anti-Catholic in orientation. This body, which governed Oregon from 1843-1848, gladly conspired with increasing numbers of US immigrants coming over the Oregon Trail to push aside the French-Canadian, Metis, and Indian populations and to violate their land claims and their rights.

England's motivation for pressing its claim to the Columbia District between the Columbia River and the 49th parallel was significantly lessened by the Hudson's Bay Company move of its headquarters. Other issues and events in North America and Europe during this time were, perhaps, more important in shoving the story of the Catholic Church's development to the margins of history. England was contending with problems generated by the potato famine in Ireland. As well, English Prime Minister Robert Peel was concerned to push through domestic reforms, notably the repeal of the Corn Laws, in order to place England on the side of free trade. On the North American continent, Great Britain also had to contend with French-English tensions that continued to simmer and at times boil over in Lower Canada.

Continuing with a North American lens, the United States sacrificed the territory between the 49th parallel and President Polk's original claim to a boundary of fifty-four forty for the greater prize of northern Mexico, territory it took through the Mexican-American War of 1846-1847.[6] Even Polk did not want wars with Great Britain and Mexico at the same time. Besides the massive internal migration of people from the eastern United States to the West over the Oregon Trail, both the United States and Canada had to contend with the arrival of millions of Irish and hundreds of thousands of Germans. Ecclesially in the United States the difficulties of Catholics in the Oregon Territory counted for little against the drastic implications of incorporating Northern Mexico into the United States and providing services to the Catholics among the Irish and Germans arriving in the United States during this period.

On an international scene, the Revolutions of 1848 in Europe, the Irish Potato Famine, and the emigration of Irish, Germans, and others to the United States deeply concerned and put severe strain on the Roman

Catholic Church.

During the short five-year span between 1843, when the Apostolic Vicariate was erected, and 1848 when the land below the 49th parallel officially became the Oregon Territory of the United States, massive change and disruption characterized not only the Oregon Country but all of North America and Europe. The change and disruption eclipsed the French-Canadian, Catholic story in the Oregon Country.

Relentless East to West Trajectory Coupled With an Entrenched English/US Master Story

A second reason for the absence of the French-Canadian and Catholic story of the Pacific Northwest rests with US Catholic historiography. This historiography shares the relentless east to west trajectory and entrenched English/US master story that is part of secular and religious history in the USCatholic historians bought into the master story in their effort to construct an"American" Catholicism.For reasons of ecclesiastical survival and ministerial effectiveness both the majority of bishops in the US and Catholic historians have constructed a story of a genuinely American (hear US) Catholicism understood as rooted in the English Genteel Maryland Catholic tradition and appropriated by all right thinking immigrants to the United States. Thomas T. McAvoy's *A History of the Catholic Church in the United States* is explicitly structured in this way.[7]

Even as the historiography of Catholicism in the United States has come to recognize ethnic communities far more readily, it still presents them as coming from Europe to the United States and only then moving further west.[8] James Hennessey's *work* stands out from recent histories of Catholicism in the United States for its nearly two-page treatment of the French-Canadian Catholic presence in the Pacific Northwest, in which he briefly alludes to the political and ecclesiastical complexities that accompanied the formation of the Archdiocese of Oregon.[9]

When histories of Catholicism address the West, it is Pierre DeSmet who receives attention and later Archbishop Lamay of Santa Fe.Both are men who go from the east in the United States to the West,DeSmet to missionize the Flathead/Salish Indians and Lamay to lead a diocese largely Mexican in population that needs to be brought into the US Catholic orbit.

This east to west trajectory does two things to the story of Catholi-

cism in the West. First, it remakes Catholics in the west into Anglos from the United States. This renders invisible Native American Catholics, French, Metis, and Hispanic Catholics or makes them merely ancillary to the narrative. Second, the east to west trajectory, coupled with the English/US master story, renders invisible Catholic immigrants from other parts of the world who have arrived from the north, from the west, and from the south. By the time A.M.A. Blanchet arrives in Walla Walla in 1847, the population of his diocese and the larger Oregon Province includes not only Native Americans, French-Canadian, Metis, and Anglo-Americans, but people from Hawaii, Samoa, and various European and Asian countries.

A central element in the English master story is its Protestant character. While Catholic bishops and historians work to explain why European Catholic immigrants should be allowed into the English master story without becoming Protestant, for Protestants the English master story in the nineteenth-century and to some extent even today justifies intense anti-Catholicism. Such sentiment certainly contributed to A.M.A. Blanchet being blamed for the massacre of Marcus and Narcissa Whitman at their ABCFM Waiilatpu mission in November of 1847, less than three months after Blanchet's arrival in Walla Walla.

The east-to-west trajectory and the Anglo-US master story serve to minimize attention to the history of the Catholic Church in the Oregon Country. The effort of explicitly Catholic historiographers to fit the story of US Catholicism into this consensus history further minimizes attention to people and events that do not fit that mold.[10]

The Battle to Establish Ecclesiastical Presence

So influential are the characteristics of the dominant secular and religious historical narratives that even the three accounts that focus on Catholicism in the Pacific Northwest – Edwin Vincent O'Hara, Alfred P. Schoenberg, and Jeffrey Burns[11] miss the full significance of the fact that the A.M.A. Blanchet, first bishop of Walla Walla and later Nesqually (1847-1879) is French-speaking. Nor do they consider the fact that A.M.A. Blanchet, as well as his brother F.N. and Modeste Demers, go to Europe, Mexico, Quebec, and countries of South America seeking funds for support, not to the Catholic Church in the United States. In other words, these narratives are not sure how to handle a church whose self-conception

is first French-Canadian, then international, and not US. None addresses the fact that the early founders of the church in the region, as French-Canadians, did not share in the myth of Manifest Destiny that is inherent in the dominant historical narratives with their east to west trajectory.

These three texts present their stories primarily as a battle to establish ecclesiastical institutions against great odds, which is true. But in focussing on ecclesiastical structures they also miss the regional influence on religiousness. Burns' title aptly conveys his organizing metaphor. His story presents heroic clergy working at, as Burns puts it, "the difficult task of inspiring an indifferent people to devotion."[12] Burns is correct to assert that there is something about the region that tends to leach religiousness, at least institutional religiousness, out of people. If Roberta Brown's and my research is on target, one must ask whether this leaching occurs in the same way for French-Canadian and Metis as for those who come from the Eastern United States.

One of the major obstacles to establishing ecclesiastical institutions that all the narratives recognize is geography. There is too much space and people are spread too far apart. A.M.A. Blanchet noticed the problems of geography early on and requested a bishop for the eastern reaches of his diocese because he could not cross mountains in winter and considered it unreasonable to expect the Indians to leave their hunting grounds in summer to receive the sacrament of confirmation.[13]

A second major problem all three authors identify is lack of resources, something that led to intense conflict between religious orders and bishops that continued well into the twentieth century. Blanchet's correspondence is full of references to staffing, supplies, and money. Fr. Peter Hylebos, pastor of St. Leo Parish, Tacoma, Washington, wrote to Bishop O'Dea shortly after the turn of the century that he could not provide his annual diocesan assessment because the Franciscan Sisters were begging on the streets for funds for their hospital and he had been unsuccessful canvassing the same people (Archives of the Archdiocese of Seattle).Lack of resources made bishops, clergy, religious, and actively involved laity keenly aware of the fragility of the institutional church in the region.

While O'Hara, Burns, and Schoenberg address lack of resources, none considers how this might shape the religiousness of the people. In fact, long stretches of separation from locations where Catholic ritual life was readily available shaped the laity. Their spirituality became more

episodic. Life-cycle sacraments carried increasing weight. And until after the railroads brought a sufficient population of Catholic immigrants to construct pockets of Catholic communities in the region, laity exercised a marked independence from clerical influence and control. The circumstances in the region shaped the religiousness of Catholics. Many laity renegotiated their relationship to their religious denominations, and reconstructed their moral and religious worlds to better fit the circumstances of the frontier.

Value of a Regional/Borderland Perspective: Blanchet Correspondence

If one begins the story of the Catholic Church in the Pacific Northwest with the records of that church, in this case the letter press books of A.M.A. Blanchet, a number of themes emerge that require the history of Catholicism in the United States, at least in this region of the United States, to be written quite differently. If one starts the story with the Blanchet correspondence, eight significant points emerge that must be incorporated into or shape the narrative.

1.The Catholic Church in the United States can be fully understood only when a comparative approach is used that looks at the church in terms of the distinctiveness of its multiple regional contexts. The single master narrative of incorporating Catholics into the expansion of the Maryland English, Genteel Catholic tradition, misses too much.[14]

2.The Church was from the beginning multicultural in nature. A French-Canadian bishop in the wilderness, A.M.A. Blanchet had to negotiate Native American, French-Canadian, Metis, Asian, European, and Yankee Protestant cultures. A look at the patient ledger of the Providence Sisters Hospital in Vancouver for one day of 1856 shows among others, patients who are Native American, Armenian, Polish, German, Irish, and assorted forms of US.

3.Clergy entered a religious world already constructed. In the eastern part of A.M.A.'s diocese initial evangelization had been done by Canadian Iroquois who had migrated West. The French-Canadian and Metis employees of the Hudson's Bay Company who upon settling built a church and requested priests from Quebec had, during their years in the fur trade and marrying into Indian tribes, organized their own moral and religious worlds before the priests arrived.[15]This included, for some, having the Methodist and Anglican ministers who preceded the arrival of Catholic

priests bless their unions with indigenous women, something that distressed both Blanchets and other early bishops.

4. Attending to the Blanchet correspondence highlights the significance of explicit chronological phases in the history of the church in the Pacific Northwest and any region. A distinctly French-Canadian, Metis, Indian phase of the Catholic Church in the region ends by 1855, brought down by the massive immigration from the United States, the California Gold Rush, Indian treaties, and a flu epidemic. It was superseded by a mainly Irish and German Catholic population, spurred by US cavalry soldiers mustering out from Fort Vancouver and Fort Steilacoom, and later by mixed European immigrations that came via the railroad.

5. One striking fact conveyed by Blanchet's letter press books is the overwhelming task in the west of making religion real to oneself and to one's surrounding society. Blanchet's letters contain scenes of intense discouragement and great optimism. Focus on the equipment of Catholic ritual life is one way the deliberate construction of an ecclesiastical religious world comes through.

6. Blanchet's disputes with the Oregon provisional and later territorial governments over land claims was unresolved during his lifetime. Church-state conflict is a significant part of the story of Catholicism in the Pacific Northwest, a story that ends not just with the settlement of the land claims but goes on to the infamous Oregon School Law aimed against Catholics that make attendance at public schools compulsory. This part of the Catholic story continues to be minimized in US Catholic historiography in an effort to make Catholics good Americans.

7. A.M.A. Blanchet had to adapt to his new context. A careful comparison of A.M.A. Blanchet's comments on the Catholic Church in the United States during his initial trip to the Diocese of Walla Walla with comments made in letters toward the end of his tenure as bishop is one way to begin to understand how Catholic institutional leaders adapted to the US context other than by embracing the English/US master story of manifest destiny.

8. A.M.A. Blanchet brings the outsider's perspective to our understanding of the development of the Catholic Church in the United States. He viewed the social, political, and cultural dynamics of the Oregon Country – from Indian Wars to wagon trains to the deceit of the Provisional Government through his French-Canadian eyes. He was not interested in conquering the West as were the Louispoli (the Indian

referent for people from the United States). Nor was he interested in turning Indians into middle-class Protestants as were the Whitmans, Jason Lee, and other Protestant missionaries. Hence A.M.A. Blanchet's letter press books offer a distinctive and alternative perspective from which to view the tumultuous events that shaped the Oregon Country.

Conclusion

The letter press books of A.M.A. Blanchet complicate the history of Catholicism in the United States. Written by an outsider – Catholic and French-Canadian – the letters operate from different assumptions than do the writings of US-born clergy or clergy of Irish descent. Blanchet's letters tell the story of a Pacific Rim Church, international, multi-cultural, and indigenous in character, a Church that survived despite anti-Catholic prejudice and the arrival of waves of immigrants from the eastern United States that literally swamp the original French-Canadian, Metis, and indigenous population. Taking a closer look at the construction of the Catholic Church in this borderland region, then, reveals significant subcurrents in a complex US Catholic history. Revealing such subcurrents is one significant contribution of a borderland focus to US Catholic history.

Endnotes

1. See Patricia Nelson Limerick, Clyde A. Milner II, and Charles E. Rankin, eds., *Trails: Toward a New Western History* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1991).

2. D. Michael Quinn, "Religion in the American West," in *Under An Open Sky: Rethinking America's Western Past,* eds., William Cronon, George Miles, and Jay Gitlin (New York: W.W. Norton, 1992). In *The American West: A Twentieth-Century History* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1989), Michael Malone and Richard Etulain provide a brief overview of religion as a category of culture (193-205).

3. Sydney Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 544. Mark Noll acknowledges the pluralism of religion in the West from the beginning but ends his discussion there (*A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992], 325-326). Edwin Scott Gaustad devotes a four and one-half

page section to Catholicism on the frontier without managing to say anything about Catholics in the Oregon country (*A Religious History of America* [San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1990], 151-156).

4. Blanchet had been appointed bishop, despite the fact that the majority of bishops at the Third Plenary Council of Baltimore had favored a Jesuit from the St. Louis Province. Both the bishop of Quebec, Signay, and the Bishop of Baltimore agreed and jointly requested that the mission be made an Apostolic Vicariate.

5. See Wilfred P. Schoenberg, *A History of the Catholic Church in the Pacific Northwest, 1743-1983* (Washington: Pastoral Press, 1987), 77-97; Edwin Vincent O'Hara, *A Pioneer Catholic History of Oregon* (Portland, Oregon: n.p.,1911): 97-100; and Vincent J. McNally, "Victoria: An American Diocese in Canada," *Canadian Catholic Historical Association Historical Studies* 57 (1990): 8-9.

6. Robert Hine, *The American West: An Interpretive History* (Boston: Little Brown, 1973): 94-95.

7. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1969.

8. See Jay P. Dolan, *The American Catholic Experience: A History From Colonial Times to the Present* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1985); and Patrick W. Carey, *The Roman Catholics in America* (Westport: Praeger, 1996).

9. *American Catholics: A History of the Roman Catholic Community in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 133-134.

10. See Thomas A. Tweed's "Introduction: Narrating US Religious History" in *Retelling US Religious History*, ed. Thomas A. Tweed (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997): 1-23.

11. O'Hara, *Pioneer Catholic History of Oregon;* Schoenberg, *A History of the Catholic Church in the Pacific Northwest;* and Jeffrey M. Burns, "Building the Best: A History of Catholic Parish Life in the Pacific States," *The American Catholic Parish; A History from 1850 to the Present*, ed. Jay P. Dolan (New York: Paulist Press, 1987).

12. "Building the Best," 15.

13. Blanchet to Fr. Joset, 18 February 1854, AA, Register, series A, Vol. 2.

14. Helpful is William Westfall, "Voices from the Attic: The Canadian Border and the Writing of American Religious History," in *Retelling US Religious History,* 181-199. See also Herbert Bolton's 1933 classic "The Epic of

Greater America" in *Bolton and the Spanish Borderlands*, ed. John Francis Bannon (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1954), 301-332.

15. See Laurie Maffley-Kipp, "The Moral World of a Mining Camp," in *Religion and Society in Frontier California* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 110-147.