

The Lost Soul of Scott Hahn

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Rome Sweet Home: Our Journey to Catholicism. Scott and Kimberly Hahn.

What sorts of people write autobiographies when they are healthy and well at 35? Generally there are three sorts: egotists, egomaniacs, and megalomaniacs. There seems to be no other plausible reason for writing the story of one's life when it has barely begun. But the fawning Peter Kreeft, a confused mind who wrote the Foreword for this book, disagrees. According to Kreeft, Scott and Kimberly Hahn are "one of the beautiful and bright-shining stars in the firmament of hope for our desperate days." The Hahns, writes Kreeft shamelessly, "are simply very bright, clear-thinking and irrefutably reasonable... passionately in love with Truth and with honesty. They are incapable of fudging anything except fudge." Kreeft calls the Hahns "stars" for only one reason: their noisy rejection of Christianity and conversion to Roman Catholicism. They have no other "achievement."

I once knew Scott Hahn. I met him about twelve years ago when he was a Presbyterian minister living in the Washington, D.C. area. (I had spoken to Hahn by phone before that: When he was a student at Gordon-Conwell Seminary, I paid him to record the guest lectures of Gordon Clark at the seminary.) Being an administrative assistant to a Member of Congress at the time, I invited Hahn (and others) to speak to a group of Congressional staffers, and he spoke on his favorite topic, "familism," which is his apotheosis of the family. At the time I had no knowledge of Hahn's real theological views; I was naive enough to think that a Presbyterian minister actually believed Presbyterian doctrine, and Hahn dissembled well enough. He fooled me, and a number of other people as well. In a discussion I had with Hahn after his lecture, it became clear that one of Hahn's preoccupations – in addition to his obsession with the notion of family – was eschatology: He was a postmillennialist who had been heavily influenced by the Reconstructionist movement. In fact, he was the (unordained) pastor of a Reconstructionist church in Fairfax, Virginia.

Romeward Bound

Hahn is one of a few seminary-trained, apparently well-educated Protestant ministers who have joined the Roman Catholic Church over the last few years. The Hahns have gained some notoriety from their speeches and tapes, and now this book, which is based on their speeches, will add to that notoriety. One remark his wife makes in this book suggests that Hahn's desire to be noticed is great: "Scott suffered tremendous loneliness. He was misunderstood and rejected by many Protestant friends who didn't want to talk to him.... He felt that former professors didn't think he was worth pursuing to convince him he was wrong [about Scripture]. And he couldn't understand the nonchalance of a number of [Roman] Catholics at Marquette [University, where Hahn was a student at the time] over his conversion, acting rather hohum over the whole thing, rather than welcoming him for all he had risked and left behind" (109). What good is being a martyr if no one notices you?

Two other men defected to Rome as a result of Hahn's influence: his seminary classmate Gerald Matatics, and Presbyterian Church in America minister William Bales. Other defections, such as that of author Thomas Howard, are apparently unrelated to Hahn's. Why were these men seduced by Rome? The answers to that question are complex. Each man's seduction is probably unique. But there are some features of Hahn's seduction that reveal fatal weaknesses in what passes for contemporary Protestant Christianity. Today Hahn teaches at the Franciscan Seminary of Steubenville (Ohio), a charismatic Roman Catholic institution. His wife, the daughter of a Presbyterian clergyman, is also a graduate of Gordon-Conwell: She wanted to be a pastor, she says.

Liberalism and Arminianism

The first of the reasons for Hahn's conversion to Romanism is liberalism and Arminianism. Hahn tells us that he was "baptized a Presbyterian" and "raised in a nominal Protestant home. Church and religion played a small role in my life and for my family...." As a teenager, he was a drug-using criminal who lied his way out of jail: "Faced with a yearlong sentence to a detention center for a variety of charges, I barely lied my way out of the sentence and into six months of probation instead" (1). In high school Hahn became active in Young Life, an Arminian evangelistic group. There he read Paul Little and C. S. Lewis. He also had some religious experiences: "Before finishing my sophomore year, I experienced the transforming power of God's grace in conversion. Within the next year, I experienced a special outpouring of the Holy Spirit in a personal and life-changing way." Apparently Hahn had both a conversion experience and a charismatic experience in high school. In his senior year, he met the Presbyterian John Gerstner, "one of my favorite theologians" (31). While in high school, Hahn also became enamored of Luther and Calvin, apparently because they appealed to his need for heroes: "I decided the figures in Christian history who most appealed to me...were the great protestant reformers Martin Luther and John Calvin" (5). But the theologies of Luther and Calvin seemed to play relatively small parts in Hahn's thinking; he was fascinated by other things. A guitarist, Hahn liked modern music: "The summer before going off to college, I toured the United States, Scotland, England and Holland, playing guitar in a Christian musical group, the Continentals" (13). Hahn attended the theologically liberal but economically conservative Grove City College, a college affiliated with the mainline Presbyterian church, where he concentrated in theology, philosophy, and economics, and continued his activity in Young Life. While in college, Hahn "discovered that the covenant was really the key for unlocking the whole Bible" (17). Beware the man who thinks he has discovered some sort of "key" for understanding the Bible, whether it is the idea of covenant, a scheme of dispensations (instituted by covenants), or a five-point covenantal model.

Thomism and Evidentialism

The second major factor influencing Hahn's conversion to Rome seems to be the official Roman Catholic philosophy of Thomas Aquinas and evidentialism. While at nominally Protestant Grove City College, Hahn "had become enamored with and steeped in the philosophy of Saint Thomas. In spite of my anti-Catholic outlook, I had known a good thing when I found it, and in my mind, no one could compare to Aquinas.... I had

devoured his philosophical writings, especially his metaphysics, eventually acquiring the odd and unlikely reputation for being an ‘evangelical Thomist’ “ (101).

During his first years in Gordon-Conwell Seminary, 1979-81, Hahn suffered from a confused mental state: “At this point I would describe my study as a detective story. I was searching Scripture to discover clues as to the whereabouts of real Christianity” (25). Although Hahn does not mention it in the book, his tuition at Gordon-Conwell was paid by a Calvinist Christian businessman who wanted to support a student who understood both free market economics and Christian theology, for the purpose of being able to teach economics to clergymen and Christian theology to economists. Hahn was highly recommended to the businessman by the Chairman of the Economics Department at Grove City. What Hahn learned at Grove City was Thomism, and his interest in economics – which he says he studied only to mollify his “practical” father, not because he was genuinely interested in the subject – has disappeared. Hahn’s obsession is to convert Christians to Catholicism, not to educate clergymen about principles of economics or economists about Christian theology. He owes one Christian businessman many thousand dollars and his former economics professor an apology.

Justification by Works and Norman Shepherd

While he was at Gordon-Conwell being supported by a Calvinist Christian businessman, Hahn adopted the Roman Catholic view of justification: “When Christ formed the New Covenant with us, then, it was much more than a simple contract or legal exchange, where he took our sin and gave us his righteousness, as Luther and Calvin explained it.... In fact, I discovered that nowhere did Saint Paul ever teach that we were justified by faith alone! Sola fide was unscriptural! “I was so excited about this discovery. I shared it with some friends, who were amazed at how much sense it made. Then one friend stopped me and asked if I knew who else was teaching this way on justification. When I responded that I didn’t, he told me that Dr. Norman Shepherd, a professor at Westminster Theological Seminary (the strictest Presbyterian Calvinist seminary in America) was about to undergo a heresy trial for teaching the same view of justification that I was expounding. “So I called Professor Shepherd and talked with him. He said he was accused of teaching something contrary to the teachings of Scripture, Luther and Calvin. As I heard him describe what he was teaching, I thought, Hey, that is what I’m saying” (30-31).

As for Kimberly, “At this point [more than halfway through seminary] I was not steeped in Reformation theology, so the change in how I viewed justification did not seem momentous” (42). Please consider the import of that statement. Here are two graduates of a Presbyterian College, two students nearing completion of their studies at reputedly one of the best evangelical Protestant seminaries in the country, two professing Christians – and the meaning of justification is not all that important to them. As we shall soon see, despite – or rather because of – their education, the Hahns – especially Scott – could not defend the Reformation principles of the Bible alone, faith alone, and Christ alone.

Reconstructionism and Theonomy

The fourth major influence on Hahn’s conversion to Romanism was the Reconstructionist

movement. After attending seminary, Hahn had intended to study theology at the University of Aberdeen in Scotland, where he had been accepted, but he changed his mind because of Margaret Thatcher: “Margaret Thatcher made it almost impossible for Americans to have babies at British taxpayers’ expense; so we took this as sign for us to look elsewhere for work, delaying doctoral studies for a while” (32). Not having paid for his own education, Hahn apparently did not intend to pay for his children either. The principles of economics seem to have been quite forgotten.

Instead, Hahn was hired as pastor and schoolteacher by a Reconstructionist church in Fairfax, Virginia: “When I candidated for the position at Trinity Presbyterian Church, I shared my views and concerns regarding justification – that I took Dr. Shepherd’s position. They understood and said they did, too. So shortly before graduation, I accepted the pastorate at Trinity, as well as a teaching position in their high school, Fairfax Christian School” (33). The Reconstructionist church was not fooled: They knew quite well that Hahn had defected from the Biblical doctrine of justification by faith, and they wanted him for that reason.

While pastoring the Reconstructionist church, Hahn “began to see how important liturgy was for the covenant.... Liturgy represented the way God fathered the covenant family...” (43). “My parishioners grew excited. The elders even asked me to revise our liturgy.” While teaching his ideas at the school, his Roman Catholicism was so obvious that several of his students told him he would join the Roman Catholic church. (Someone should write a book about Reconstructionist churches and their affinity for Roman Catholic and Orthodox liturgy and doctrine.) Hahn was also invited to teach at Dominion Theological Institute (which later merged with Chesapeake Theological Seminary). During this period he became convinced of the Roman doctrine that Jesus Christ was physically present in the bread and the wine. Thus, when one participates in mass, one is eating the physical body and drinking the physical blood of Christ. The proper name for the practice – if Catholics were actually doing what they dogmatically assert that they are doing – is ritual cannibalism.

Hahn was also teaching his seminary students – contrary to what the seminary itself believed, contrary to what he was being paid to teach, and without informing the leadership of the seminary – that justification by faith alone was false. The fact that he was denying the Christian doctrine of justification while being paid to teach it does not seem to bother him. Oddly, Hahn opens his book with this story designed to illustrate his lifelong honesty: “I recall the last time I ever attended our family’s church. The minister was preaching all about his doubts regarding the Virgin Birth of Jesus and his bodily Resurrection. I just stood up in the middle of his sermon and walked out. I remember thinking, I’m not sure what I believe, but at least I’m honest enough not to stand up and attack the things I’m supposed to teach” (1). But that is exactly what Hahn did when he taught seminary classes, and that is exactly what he did when he accepted money for seminary tuition under false pretenses. After Hahn attacked sola fide in his seminary classes in Virginia, one of the students challenged him to defend sola scriptura. He could not (51-52). After seven years in “Protestant” educational institutions, and now a Presbyterian minister, Hahn, who by all accounts was an excellent student, could not defend the major principles of the Protestant Reformation.

Messages from God and Mary

The Hahns left Virginia and moved back to Grove City, where Scott took a job as assistant to the college president and instructor in theology, of all things. Liberalism, Arminianism, Thomism, evidentialism, and Reconstructionism had persuaded Hahn of the truth of Catholicism, and now Mary clinched the argument: Hahn began feeling that God was “calling me into the [Roman] Catholic Church” (60). Scott and Kimberly got “feelings,” “leadings,” “nudges,” “peace,” “impressions,” and “callings,” – alleged messages from God and his mother, Mary. While teaching theology at Grove City College, Hahn drove down to Duquesne University in Pittsburgh for theology classes. There he was “the only student defending Pope John Paul II!” (66), and there he first became involved with Opus Dei (67). After someone mailed him a Rosary, Hahn decided to perform an experiment by praying to Mary about an “impossible situation.” Hahn prayed, and the impossible situation resolved itself within three months. In Hahn’s irrational mind, praying the Rosary obviously worked. As a result, Hahn now prays to Mary daily.

That, of course, is how all superstitions begin: committing the logical fallacy post hoc, ergo propter hoc. Leaving Grove City, Hahn decided to continue his studies at Marquette University. While in Milwaukee he learned that his seminary classmate, Gerald Matatics, was going to be absorbed into the Roman Catholic church two weeks later at Easter, 1986. Hahn, who had talked Matatics into Roman Catholicism, could not stand to have him go first, yet Hahn had promised his wife that he would not become a Roman Catholic until 1990. He asked her to pray about releasing him from his promise, and she did so. Hahn and Matatics were both absorbed by the Roman Catholic Church in 1986. Hahn says that he “had fallen head over heels in love with our Lord in the Eucharist!” (88).

Kimberly was jealous of Scott’s long walks and talks with Mary. During Christmas 1986 Kimberly, who was pregnant, got a “word from the Lord” concerning her baby (115). When the baby was baptized a Roman Catholic, Kimberly “was astounded at the beauty of the liturgy” (117). Kimberly “came to appreciate that [baby] Hannah had become a child of God through baptism, being born again by water and the Spirit. As I studied baptism, it connected with what I had already done on justification. As with Scott, my study in seminary had led me to reject as unscriptural the Protestant teaching of justification by faith alone” (137). Note well: “As with Scott, my study in seminary had led me to reject as unscriptural the Protestant teaching of justification by faith alone.”

When Hahn was confirmed, he chose Francis de Sales as his “patron saint,” because “de Sales happened to be the Bishop of Geneva, Switzerland, while John Calvin was leading the people farther away from the Catholic Faith... [He] was such an effective preacher and apologist that, through his sermons and pamphlets, over forty thousand Calvinists were brought back into the Church” (133).

John Gerstner and Robert Knudsen

Before defecting to Rome, Hahn and Matatics had met with John Gerstner, the evidentialist Presbyterian theologian who was unable to persuade them of the errors of Roman Catholicism. After his conversion, Hahn debated with Robert Knudsen, the Dooyeweerdian and Van Tilian professor of apologetics at Westminster Seminary, about sola fide and sola scriptura. Hahn writes: "I never dreamed of such a positive outcome. Not only did the Westminster Seminary students in attendance express their surprise and excitement at the end," his wife was impressed too. I have listened to that debate on cassette tape, and Apologetics Professor Knudsen's performance is embarrassing and incompetent.

Meeting the Pope

In January 1992, Dr. Jerry Kirk, Hahn's father-in-law, a Presbyterian minister in Cincinnati, invited Hahn to accompany him to Rome to meet the pope. There he met the "Holy Father" for a few seconds and the next day went to a chapel for mass with the pope. He embraced the pope, giving him a personal letter and a check. "As I left the presence of Pope John Paul II – the one anointed by my heavenly Father and eldest Brother to shepherd the covenant family of God on earth – I had a strong sense that God was saying, 'Scott, the best is yet to come' " (172). Hahn does not explain this dark, oracular saying: Does it mean that he will be elected the first American pope? Appointed cardinal? Invited to Rome to join the Vatican lowerarchy? Named Grand Inquisitor? We are not told.

The State of Contemporary "Protestantism"

Hahn's defection is one of several similar defections. They are occurring, not because Rome is a true church, but because of the apostasy of "Protestantism." The largest American Protestant denominations are either unbelieving or unknowing, priding themselves on their rejection of Scripture, their vacuous faith, or their limited knowledge. Many smaller denominations and independent churches are in little better condition. They are largely Arminian – which is semi-Romanist already, believing in man's free will; revivalist – which is informed by Roman Catholic experientialism; or charismatic – which continues Rome's theology of miracles and gifts. American "Protestantism" is mostly Roman Catholic already. Some of the more conservative churches have been led astray by Reconstructionism, by religiously cooperative efforts in the anti-abortion movement, by programs of social and political reform. Just when the preaching of the Gospel is most urgently needed, it is rarely heard in "Protestant" pulpits. It is doubtful that most graduates of theological schools could give a clear and accurate summary of the Gospel. The Roman Catholic church is by far the largest ecclesiastical organization in America with about 58 million subjects; it operates tens of thousands of churches, thousands of schools, and hundreds of colleges. Worldwide, it claims more than 950 million subjects. Its loyal American subjects are becoming more and more militant in every area. Hahn's own zeal for the pope is reflected not only in this book, but in the scores of tapes he and his wife have produced and which have been distributed by the hundreds of thousands. Only the grace of God can save us from another Dark Age and the church that Luther

recognized as the slaughterhouse of souls.

May God send forth his light and his truth.

John W. Robbins