
Jeffrey Morrow, Seton Hall University
Faith, Reason and History in Early Modern Catholic Biblical Interpretation: Fr. Richard Simon and St. Thomas More

Jeffrey L. Morrow

Abstract

This article contrasts St. Thomas More's theoretical work on the role of faith and history in biblical exegesis with that of Fr. Richard Simon. I argue that, although Simon's work appears to be a critique of his more skeptical contemporaries like Hobbes and Spinoza, in reality he is carrying their work forward. I argue that More's union of faith and reason, theology and history, is more promising than Simon's for Catholic theological biblical exegesis.

Keywords

Thomas More, Richard Simon, faith, history, biblical exegesis

The debate about the role of faith, reason, and history in Catholic biblical exegesis is a long one that extends back into the medieval period. Contemporary concerns over an overly secularized historical exegesis often point to examples from the more skeptical seventeenth century, like Hobbes and Spinoza. One often suggested alternative option from that time is Fr. Richard Simon. Thus, in the first half of this article, I take a look at Simon, regarded as a first-rate historical biblical critic from historical criticism's earliest inception in the seventeenth century. Simon could be presented as escaping the skepticism of the three more skeptical exegetes against whom he wrote in his own work. After all, Simon's historical critical work is a critique of the more perilous approaches of Isaac La Peyrère, Hobbes, and Spinoza, and Simon's is intended to be a robust defense of Catholic tradition. What I hope to show, however, is that Simon's apologetic is dubious at best, and his hermeneutic, although more learned and rigorous than even Spinoza's, is little more than an elaboration upon the very methods initiated by La Peyrère, Hobbes, and Spinoza. Far from being a defense of Catholic tradition, Simon's hermeneutic is a