

Anti-Catholicism on the Internet

by Robert P. Lockwood

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When Joseph Lieberman was nominated as the Democratic vice-presidential candidate in the summer of 2000, commentators feared an upsurge in anti-Semitism in reaction to the Jewish senator from Connecticut. Reporters scanned the Internet to look for anti-Semitic sites and searching for anti-Semitic hate speech. For the most part, they found, other than the usual suspects, no outburst of such sentiments. After the election, Jewish organizations praised the fact that the senator's national campaign evidenced little or nothing of traditional anti-Semitic activities in the United States.

It goes without saying that this tolerance toward Mr. Lieberman's Jewish faith is an admirable sign. Yet, it is questionable if the results of that initial Internet search would have been the same if either party had nominated a Catholic for president or vice president. It is also questionable whether a reporter in that event would have even considered combing the Internet for anti-Catholic rhetoric. More likely, that reporter would have been raising questions about the candidate's Catholic faith, seeing that faith as a threat rather than an opportunity for tolerance. If the reporter did comb the Internet, it would have been to find material to buttress that alleged Catholic threat, rather than to warn about an underbelly of anti-Catholic prejudice. And the reporter would not have to look very far or "surf" very long. The Internet is inundated with anti-Catholic websites and anti-Catholic rhetoric.

We are all well aware that there are anti-Semitic sites on the

Internet and sites that engage in other forms of racism. That has been well documented. Virtually ignored, however, is the abundance of anti-Catholicism that exists on the Internet. The existence of anti-Catholicism is simply not a story that generates much interest in the secular press. Yet, anti-Catholicism on the Internet is neither hidden nor difficult to find. Logon to any of the popular search engines for the Internet and type in "Roman Catholicism" or "Roman Catholic." More than likely, you will find in one of your first 10 options for websites to explore an Internet site dedicated to anti-Catholicism. Using Alta Vista, for example, six of the first 20 websites that appear are specifically anti-Catholic; using "Go To," seven of the first 20 cites listed were anti-Catholic. The pervasiveness of anti-Catholicism on the Internet reflects how deeply entrenched, obsessive and normative this prejudice is within contemporary culture. If the Internet is our most contemporary means of communication and information gathering, then anti-Catholicism is entering the new Millenium in a powerful fashion.

Anti-Catholicism has been carried along by new technologies since its inception. The birth of anti-Catholicism in Western Civilization was strongly tied to the invention of moveable type that created the printing press. Johann Gutenberg of Strasbourg is generally credited with the "invention" of printing from moveable metal type. Born in 1400, the first printed work he produced may have been a letter of indulgence issued by Pope Nicholas V in 1451. In 1456 he produced his first type-printed book, the famous "Gutenberg Bible" which is popularly considered the birth of modern publishing.¹ Within a matter of just two decades, printing presses spread throughout Europe and "a passion for books became one of the effervescent ingredients of the Reformation age."²

By the time that Martin Luther posted his 95 "theses" on the door of the castle church of Wittenberg on Halloween

1517³ published works – meaning works meant for the public – were widely popular. In a sense, “news” had been created and the printed word would spread the Reformation throughout England and Europe by the use of books and popular tracts. Anti-Catholic literature became a part of the popular polemics of the time.

The post-Reformation period of the mid 16th and 17th Seventeenth centuries saw a wealth of anti-Catholic published material that would establish the foundation for anti-Catholic historical and cultural assumptions that are now moving to the Internet. John Foxe’s *Book of Martyrs* (1563) created the English legend of “Bloody Mary” and became the most popular book next to the Bible in the Protestant world with its tales of Protestant suffering at the hands of the Catholic queen of England. (It would come to the New World as a favorite work among the Puritans.) In Germany in 1567, two Spanish Protestants under the pseudonym Reginaldus Gonzalvus Montanus published *Sanctae Inquisitionis Hispanicae Artes*. Though a basic propaganda tract, it would be reprinted throughout Europe and be considered the definitive source on the Inquisition for over 200 years. Most inquisition “histories” written thereafter, virtually until the late 19th Century, would rely on Montanus, which became a primary source, though written by anything but an unbiased eye. It was from Montanus that the gruesome legends of demonic torture machines were invented. In 1581, the *Apologie* of William of Orange was published. Written by a French Huguenot, the *Apologie* utilized anti-Inquisition theatrics to validate the Dutch revolt against Spain and would be a source book for anti-Catholicism in the English-speaking world. The *Apologie* and Montanus created the myth of the Inquisition that still feeds the popular imagination.⁴

In the United States, anti-Catholic books and literature blossomed in the early 19th Century. Rebecca Reed’s *Six Months*

in a Convent sold 200,000 copies within a month of its publication in 1835. Reed claimed to have been a “captive” Sister in an Ursuline convent in just outside Boston, though the Mother Superior stated that Reed had been an employee of the convent who was dismissed. An angry mob burned the convent to the ground. In 1836 the most popular and famous book of anti-Catholic literature, the *Awful Disclosures of Maria Monk* was published in New York. It became one of the most widely distributed “religious” book in the United States in the 19th century.⁵ In the 20th century, anti-Catholic newspapers were widespread, particularly in the United States. They popularized centuries of anti-Catholic literature and legends. A study by the Knights of Columbus in 1914 found over 60 national anti-Catholic weekly newspapers reaching millions of readers.⁶

The advent of movies and television as a source of information and entertainment in some ways toned-down the more overt elements of anti-Catholicism because of the widespread and public nature of the medium. The violence and sexuality of anti-Catholic literature (which gave it the name “Puritan Pornography”) did not translate well to both movies and television in their early days. The crude sexual descriptions of life in a convent as contained in the *Awful Disclosures of Maria Monk* would be unacceptable to a mass audience that movies hoped to attract. Television, funded primarily by paid advertising, could hardly hope to offend nearly a quarter of its audience by anti-Catholic presentations.

However, in recent years, with the advent of cable television and a change in the culture of movie making, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of anti-Catholic imagery and rhetoric in popular media. The short-lived television program *That's Life* on ABC and movies such as *Dogma* and *Quills* evidenced a new willingness to engage in anti-Catholicism in entertainment aimed at a general audience.⁷

It should come as no surprise that the newest form of communication through the Internet should absorb this anti-Catholic heritage in an environment of increasing acceptance of anti-Catholicism in popular media. Every book title mentioned above is available in some form on the Internet. Hundreds of anti-Catholic titles and tracts, some many years old, others the creation of contemporary bigots, can be accessed. The Internet has also expanded on accessibility to this anti-Catholic heritage. No reputable publisher would be interested – except as a historical curiosity – in publishing Rebecca Reed's book today.⁸ On the Internet, however, excerpts abound and the book can be easily viewed.

By its nature, the Internet is unregulated. In addition to its benefits, it is the dumping ground for the effluvia of Western culture. There is no editing for truth, objectivity, reliability or responsibility on the Internet. With its millions of websites, personal home pages and search portals, it is impossible to monitor or respond in any consistent fashion to its content. It would take a lifetime to even begin to visit every anti-Catholic website on the Internet.

The nature of the Internet also leads to a generally more coarse standards even with so-called "legitimate" Internet sites. Profanity, obscenity and nudity are commonplace while they remain less so in newspapers that are still viewed as "family reading." Of course, that bar has been lowered in recent years in newspapers but it is a standard far higher than mainstream sites on the Internet. *Salon.com*, the Internet "magazine," routinely publishes descriptive obscene material and nudity. In a Halloween, 2000 offering, Salon excerpts a story with a graphic sex scene involving a mysterious Catholic girl destined for the convent.⁹ *MensJournal.com* in July 2000 featured a piece about a British comedian who refers to Pope Pius XII with a vulgarity and plays a scene in which Jesus hosts the Last Breakfast and his disciples are served Rice Krispies ("These are my corpuscles") and "orange juice doubles

as plasma.”¹⁰

Anti-Catholicism persists today in two primary forms. Traditional anti-Catholicism – fundamentalist attacks on the Church as the Scriptural “whore of Babylon” – bubbles just below the surface in many areas of our society. This traditional anti-Catholicism created many of the myths of anti-Catholicism that linger within the culture: the church as solely interested in power; Catholicism as an “alien” religion in America; Catholicism as the enemy of separation of Church and State (as well as the public school system); the Catholic Church as oppressor. This traditional anti-Catholicism sees the Church as unchristian and derived from paganism. Catholic ritual is portrayed as medieval superstition masquerading as belief. This is a Church portrayed as the enemy of the Bible, as well as the enemy of freedom.

This traditional anti-Catholicism laid the foundation for the common secular anti-Catholicism of contemporary culture. Stripped of its theological foundation, this is the bigotry of the so-called enlightened. It portrays the Church as a medieval relic, the enemy of science and individual freedom.

Born in the pseudo-scientism of the 19th Century – with its mix of nationalism, racism and class warfare – it focused on the Church as the enemy of modern thought and progress. Developed during the eugenics, birth control and pro-abortion crusades of the 20th century, it reached its contemporary culmination in various theories of sexual liberation. It is widespread in contemporary thought and sees anti-Catholicism not as a prejudice, but as a legitimate tool to be utilized to denigrate Church teaching in the public arena.

Both these forms of anti-Catholicism thrive on the Internet. In the confusing world of the Internet, however, these two expressions of anti-Catholicism mix together. The aptly-named morons.org is an obscenity-laced screed that accuses the Church of ongoing campaigns that “slaughtered millions.” The

website is primarily based on an agenda of sexual liberation, though it's focus is wider in attacking any traditional expression of values or beliefs. Yet, it provides "anti-Catholic links" which are essentially traditional old-Protestant attacks on the Catholic Church. Most of the links listed would be horrified to be associated with the gutter language and anti-Christian commentary on *morons.org*.

The number of such sophomoric sites spewing anti-Catholicism and generally anti-Christian views is legion. Run either as one-man shows on personal websites or organized more professionally for profit, these sites are generally witless attempts at satire. At The Onion,¹¹ a site for an allegedly humorous weekly newspaper published out of Wisconsin, pseudo news stories are run that lack either wit and satire. In the "religious archives" in a recent posting¹² headlines read: "Christ announces associate Christ"; "Aging Pope 'Just Blessing Everything in Sight' Say Concerned handlers'"; "Christ Converts to Islam." The Onion website is filled with the expected scatological references and obscenities. One story – "Pope Calls for Greater Understanding Between Catholics, Hellbound" had the Pope say: "During the Holocaust, the Church stood silently by while six million fellow human beings, guilty of nothing but the murder of Christ Our Lord, descended to the depths of brimstone at the hands of Protestants. Our intervention in that affair could have averted a monumental tragedy, and, more important, might have converted the souls of untold multitudes of evil heretics to the Holy Word of God."¹³

At The Catholic Page¹⁴ which is part of the "Anti-Religion Web Ring," there is "The Top 10 Reasons Why t Sucks To Be A Catholic." Authored by "Prince Wally," among the reasons listed are "Communion – the wine sucks and the wafers are dry"; and "Being an Altar Boy – Read a newspaper..." The attempt at humor is as sophomoric as The Onion Page, but the author is

straightforward that “my page is Anti-Catholic but I don’t have any problems with specific Catholics, it’s Catholicism in general that irritates me.... They have too many rules and too much hypocrisy for my taste. That makes them fun to bash.” At Ask Sister Rosseta¹⁵ the so-called “Lavender Nun” engages in double-entendres and sexual buffoonery. Particularly tasteless is a cartoonish rendition of Jesus on the cross that a person can “dress” in top hat and tails, rabbit slippers or other blasphemous outfits.

Pornography is ubiquitous on the Internet and sites that use Catholic imagery are commonplace. Models in various stages of undress garbed as clergy, bishops, priests, nuns and the pope engaged in sexual activity seems to feed in literally to the heritage of anti-Catholicism as Puritan pornography. The use of Catholic settings and sacred images on these sites only increases the nature of this peculiar fetish.

That fetish nature of these sites is even more enhanced by the use of female models dressed in Catholic school uniforms. This “virgin\harlot” fetish of Catholic schoolgirl imagery is common throughout the pornographic sites. Even more repulsive, however, are certain sites selling images of alleged Catholic girls. One such site, based in Canada, promises pornographic photos of “Catholic teens.” (There appears to be no pornographic “Baptist teens” or “Jewish teens” sites.) In a particularly repulsive fashion, this site advertises virtual pedophilia – boys and girls – while a special emphasis on the Catholicity of the young models\victims of this pornography.

In mind-numbing detail are a host of traditional anti-Catholic cites. From rural churches and personal websites, to sites for fundamentalist publishing houses, the traditional anti-Catholicism that was said to have died with the election of John F. Kennedy in 1960 thrives on the Internet. A major website is for the Jack Chick Company.¹⁶ Jack Chick was one of the first to realize in the post-Kennedy years that old-

fashioned anti-Catholicism could still make a buck. He released a series of traditional anti-Catholic “comic books” in the 1970s, the most popular being *Alberto*. *Alberto* is the story of a man who claims to have been a Jesuit priest who worked under assignment from the Vatican. Murder and assassination – as well as the usual priestly licentiousness – are common tools for the Holy See, according to the Chick comic book. Chick followed this up with a few other comics, though none as successful as the original *Alberto*. Chick, who publishes today out of California, also produces a range of small black-and-white tracts that viciously attack Catholic practices and beliefs. Perhaps the most tasteless among the tasteless is the “Death Cookie,” that portrays the Eucharist as a Satanic-inspired ritual rooted in pagan beliefs. Chick also has reproduced classic anti-Catholic works such as “Father” Chiniquy’s “Fifty Years in the Church of Rome.”¹⁷

Chick’s website is primarily a tool for selling his materials. As his advertising is routinely rejected as offensive in mainstream Christian periodicals, he has limited vehicles in which to reach an audience. He proclaims – as do most of the church-based anti-Catholic Internet sites – that his only goal is the conversion of Catholics to “bible-based” beliefs. But Chick does not bother to engage in honest dialogue, or honest argument, over Catholic beliefs. Rather, the Chick website, like so many others, peddles bombastic charges against the Church as knowingly teaching false doctrine and purposely sending souls to hell. This is ugly stuff.

At *jesus-is-lord* website¹⁸ vicious anti-Catholicism flourishes. Convents are referred to as “torture chambers” and 19th-century anti-Catholic polemics are excerpted. “Ex-priest” William Hogan, who claims to have been ordained in Ireland, writes of an abortion and the murder of the young nun-mother by “lascivious, beastly priests of the Whore.” Alleged ex-priests like Hogan made a good living after the Civil War in the

United States. They were usually tent preachers who came to town under the sponsorship of a local Protestant congregation. A few, like Chiniquy, might have actually been priests, usually with a bumpy past with Church authorities, rather than the sincere converts they claimed to be. It was a good way to make a living, as these "revivals" would draw good-sized crowds and the "free will offerings" were usually generous. Like pornographic websites today that use Catholic imagery (sacramentals, or women dressed as nuns or in Catholic school girl uniforms), the promise to the crowd was usually a touch of scandal and sex as they promised to reveal what goes on in the confessional or behind the doors of convents. Even as late as the first quarter of the 20th Century, revivals by "ex-priests" were common in the Midwest and the South.¹⁹

Jesus-is-lord reproduces "The Priest, the Woman, and the Confessional" by Chiniquy as well as "Thirty Years in Hell" by ex-priest Bernard Fresenberg (1904 date of publication) "who today stands at the Vatican's door, with the torch of Protestant wisdom, and denounces Popery with a tongue livid with the power of a living God." Jesus-is-lord provides the "Anti-Christ Slideshow" that stars "the popes of Rome and the great whore of revelation XVII the Roman Catholic Religion." The slideshow promises "blasphemy, torture, licentiousness, damnation, whoredom" and "the power of the devil." Also included on the website is a *Washington Post* wire story on the debunked *Kansas City Star* story of an alleged epidemic of AIDS in the priesthood proving, according to the website, that the Catholic priesthood is the "repository of perverts." The *Kansas City Star* should be happy that someone has treated their stories seriously. The counter for hits on Jesus-is-lord for about a two-year period shows that 1,172,583 visitors have logged onto the website.²⁰

As most parents understand, virtually any child can access pornographic images with two or three clicks of a mouse on the

Internet. It is just as simple to access anti-Catholic pages. Internet Websites such as Jack Chick's rarely have a positive presentation of their own faith. Primarily, these sites castigate other believers, particularly Catholics. At Harbor Lighthouse²¹ produced by the Ankerberg Theological Institute in Nashville, Tennessee, a wealth of anti-Catholic material is readily available. In a posted article entitled "The Spiritual Battle for Truth" – which can be downloaded for \$2 – Michael Grendon, who claims to be a former Catholic, writes: "Satan has been profoundly successful in deceiving multitudes in the name of Christ because his servants appear as ministers of righteousness. They wear high priestly garments and religious collars and carry boastful titles such as 'most reverend,' 'right reverend,' 'his excellency' and 'Holy Father.'" ²²

Catholicism is not the enemy alone, though anti-Catholic articles appear to be the highest in number at Harbor Lighthouse. Catholicism is attacked along with Jehovah Witnesses, the Islamic faith, Mormonism, New Age cults and rock music. Throughout the Harbor Lighthouse site articles appear in Spanish, particularly those attacking Marian devotion. As in the above quote, this is not, for the most part, an attempt to theologically engage Catholicism, a perfectly legitimate and sadly necessary discussion in a divided Christianity. This is simply old-time anti-Catholic nativism that has a primary form of argument that refers to Catholicism as a conscious, knowing Satanic plot to undermine Scripture. Such leaves little room for healthy and honest exchanges.

Login to Excite search engine for Roman Catholicism and one quickly will encounter the website for Cutting Edge Ministry.²³ With advertising sponsors such as Hickory Farms, Cutting Edge claims to "love you all" and wants Catholics to simply know the truth. Cutting Edge then proceeds to offer a series of articles that, among other things, claims that the

Mass is witchcraft, the Holy Father is the Antichrist, the crucifix in Catholic churches is a Satanic symbol, and that "Roman Catholic teachings are blatant frauds upon the faithful people."

At Alpha and Omega Ministries²⁴ one can read detailed explanations on how Pope Honorius I (625-638) in a letter to the patriarch of Constantinople on the nature of Christ may have been in error, thereby disputing the teaching of papal infallibility in matters of doctrinal definition.²⁵ Almost the entire website is dedicated to attacking Catholic beliefs with endlessly tiresome apologetics. While self-promotion and sales of materials seem to be a major motivation, the conscious loathing of all things Catholic seems more psychologically compulsive than faith-based.

A particularly vicious traditionalist site is The Reformation Online²⁶ which makes the Alpha and Omega ministry seem tame in comparison. This page spends most of its space dwelling on 19th Century anti-Catholic invective concerning Pope Pius IX and the fall of the Papal States. Vatican and Jesuit "one world" plots dominate the conversation. In a charge that is unique to all the traditional anti-Catholic Internet sites, Reformation Online claims that the Great Famine in Ireland was a plot concocted by Pope Pius IX. The only redeeming grace of the page is the audio of bagpipes playing "Amazing Grace" and other traditional tunes. Another anti-Catholic Internet site, Balaam's Ass²⁷ has great piano and harpsichord music while informing the reader about the Catholic Whore of Babylon, the Church's lustful art and the Masonic domination of the Holy See.

Lamb and Lion Ministries²⁸ states that it was founded in 1980 as a "non-denominational, independent ministry." Run by a board of 24 trustees "from a variety of Christian fellowships," it is based in McKinney, Texas. Though its mission statement

claims that the ministry “does not seek to convert people to any Church”²⁹ it makes clear its purpose toward Catholics. As Dr. David Reagan writes on the website under “Religious issues”: “(Catholics) should do exactly what any believer should do who is caught up in an apostate religious organization, whether it be a Catholic parish or a Protestant church. They should leave!”

While Lamb and Lion Ministries eschew talk of money and finances by stating that “we do not charge fees for any of our services,” the website seems dedicated to peddling tapes, videos, books and tracts from Dr. Reagan. Dr. Reagan writes on the “Whore of Babylon” that, “I believe that the harlot church of revelation 17 will most likely be an amalgamation of the world’s pagan religions, including apostate Protestants, under the leadership of the Catholic Church.” That might be quite a concession, as most of these anti-Catholic websites consider the Catholic Church alone to represent the Whore of Babylon. He writes on the website that the “apostasies of the Catholic Church are great in number and profound in their implications for the Christian faith...(Catholicism) is the ancient Babylonian mystery religion parading in new clothes, worshipping Mary as the ‘Queen of Heaven.’”³⁰

White Horse Publications³¹ is the website for a “Christian publishing company devoted to exposing the errors and trappings of a sacramental system of salvation.” Based in Huntsville, AL, White Horse believes that “the most prominent manifestation of that error is Roman Catholicism, or Romanism.” They publish seven books, all of which attack various aspects of Catholicism, including “Graven Bread,” a book that calls the Eucharist “a centuries-old practice that amounts to nothing less than idolatry.”³² At Bible Believers³³ an alleged ex-nun gives a testimony right out of 19th Century anti-Catholic tracts. There are the usual sexually-deviant priests, vicious penances and Roman “blasphemies.”

An army of individual pastors and their local churches have put up sites dedicated to tradition anti-Catholicism. One of the most loathsome is from Pastor Fred Phelps' Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka, Kansas. Phelps has made a name for himself for decidedly homophobic hate speech. Its Internet address is godhatesfags.org. Phelps refers to the Catholic Church as a "fag" church and claims that a third of Catholic priests are actively homosexual, seducing young boys and women. (The logic is his, not mine.) He reproduces an alleged "Diary of Another Fag Catholic Priest" and asserts that, "fag priests and dyke nuns is the order of the day for Kansas Catholics. They deserve the sick, perverted leadership that now dooms and damns them."

At Just for Catholics website³⁴ Catholics are advised to "reckon yourself an unworthy sinner and a rebel against the sovereign God. Plead guilty before the Judge of the earth, admit that you deserve the everlasting fire of hell...Do not rely on a church, Mary, the saints, a human priest, the sacrifice of the Mass, or an imaginary Purgatory." Just for Catholics is operated by a minister who claims to have been raised a Catholic but found the truth at age 14.

There are numerous websites by alleged ex-Catholics that engage in evangelization aimed specifically at Catholics. Most use anti-Catholicism as their primary means of attack. Very few rely on a positive presentation of a faith to which they hope to convert Catholics. For the most part, they simply – very simply – attack Catholic beliefs, present a distorted view of Catholic practices, and re-write history from an anti-Catholic perspective. At Pro-Gospel³⁵ they "untangle Roman Catholics from the dogmatic jungle in which they are held captive." So-called "born again" Catholics – those who have left the Church – are told to contact their Catholic friends to "rescue those who have never heard the Gospel of Jesus Christ. They – Catholics – have been in submission to the controlling, irrefutable dogmas of the Catholic clergy." The

site has registered 898,128 hits.³⁶

Reaching Catholics for Christ³⁷ comes from Bend, Oregon and has a series of articles attacking Catholicism as an “apostate” Church. Good News for Catholics³⁸ is dedicated to the proposition that the “Roman Catholic Church has led its people astray.” The organization itself began in 1981 by a very public distribution of anti-Catholic booklets at the consecration of Bishop Pierre DuMaine at San Jose, CA. On the website, they describe the Catholic Church as an “unbiblical form of Christianity which has deceived the Catholic people. It cannot be reformed or revived.” At Former Catholics for Christ³⁹ Catholics are told that the Church is “proven to be a practice of white witchcraft.”

Mission to Catholics International⁴⁰ is a long-time anti-Catholic group founded by Bart Brewer, a former priest. Brewer has made a living on anti-Catholicism. Like the tent preachers from the late 19th and early 20th Century, Brewer does the traveling circuit with a group of alleged ex-priests. Though supposedly aimed at rescuing Catholics from their false faith, the audience he serves is primarily fundamentalists who want to hear that “old-time religion” of anti-Catholicism.

Brewer’s website – which peddles Brewer tracts and books – states that the “authority claimed by the Catholic Church is blasphemous and unchristian.” In another article it is stated that “the autocratic domineering of the Catholic Church over its members dishonors Christ and the Bible.” With tangled rhetoric, the author proclaims: “But not only the Catholic who is domineered and ruled and bossed suffers. The Catholic must eat fish on Fridays and during Lent (or macaroni and cheese).”

Brewer claims that there “were no Roman Catholics until Christianity was merged with paganism into a state religion around 315 AD. The true Christians obeyed God’s word, they

never joined in the pagan corruption...There are more than 100,000 masses said all over the world every day. Jesus suffers the terrible agony of Calvary at least 1000,000 times every 24 hours instead of 'once and for all' as Scripture teaches." He concludes that the "dogma of transubstantiation is the most wicked and Satanic."

The common thread running through these "conversion" sites is the viciousness of the attacks on Catholic beliefs and practices. These sites are not content to legitimately argue theology or make a positive presentation of their own faith. Instead, they create an image of Catholic beliefs as essentially pagan. They constantly present the Catholic priesthood as corrupted by sexual deviancy and the Church as a conscious effort to deceive people in order to oppress them. Old historical canards are resurrected, long-debunked anti-Catholic tracts reproduced. Reading this material, one is left not with a positive impression of faith, but rather with a picture of an evil, satanic Catholic Church.

Anti-Catholicism also finds its way into the Internet's crazy world of militia groups and radical right-wing zealots. Though much time is spent on these pages with anti-Semitism and racism, Catholicism shares in their vicious attacks. One particularly odious page is the website of *Free American newsmagazine*⁴¹ Run by Clayton Douglas out of New Mexico, that features material on Jesuit "control" of the CIA and the old Soviet KGB and attributes to the Jesuits all kinds of political mayhem.

There are also websites from traditionalist Catholic groups, and disenchanted Catholic organizations from the left, that often borrow the language and approach of traditional anti-Catholic sites. Some of these sites represent followers of the late Archbishop Lefebvre and are formally schismatic. Their primary aim is to attack the Church today as being heretical and the Mass as celebrated contrary to traditional Catholic

teaching. Their attacks on the Church and its members are vehement, and often raise accusations of "Masonic conspiracies" or satanic infiltration, not unlike sites such as jesus-is-lord noted above. From the ex-Catholic left, the attacks are mostly from a secular perspective, and usually driven by pro-abortion or a gay agenda. Sites for "recovering Catholics" simply assume that any thinking person will have left the Church, and offer advice often centered on a supposed sexual liberation.

The amount of anti-Catholic sites on the Internet is overwhelming and shocks any serious researcher. In a paper presented to The Fifth Biennial Conference on Christianity and the Holocaust in October 1998, Mark Weitzman of The Simon Wiesenthal Center outlined anti-Semitism and Anti-Catholicism on the Internet.⁴² He explained that any search for extremism on the Internet will turn out the usual victims. He noted, however, that "one group that was conspicuously present in the list of traditional American targets is conspicuously absent when we think of targets. I am referring, of course, to Catholics, particularly Catholics in the U.S."

Weitzman acknowledges the long history of anti-Catholicism in America and he states that "the Internet has not been investigated or analyzed by researchers for its anti-Catholic propaganda. It would almost seem that no one expects to find vestiges of classical bigotry in this new medium. My own research demonstrates quite a different story. Along with other forms of extremism...one can find anti-Catholicism to be visible as well."

Weitzman reviews a number of these anti-Catholic websites, many of which have already been noted here. He found in his research that the "papacy is a common target of many of these sites. The pope, according to one, 'purposely misinterprets scripture,' according to another he is a hypocrite, who 'parades around the world as the champion of freedom and truth

for everyone, that is everyone except for those in his Romish system.' Another asks the question, 'has the Pope apologized for his persecutions?' and answers 'Don't be deceived by the clever manipulations of false teachers. The Pope has not repented, and the Roman Catholic Church has not substantially changed' for if he had, 'a repentant Pope would cast aside his blasphemous title' and 'would acknowledge that the papacy, through its blasphemous claims and the sacramental gospel, has led multitudes to eternal hell.'"

Weitzman quotes from a number of sites that identify the pope with the Antichrist then concludes that "it should come as no surprise that we can find sites that link Catholicism with Satanism...Many other categories of anti-Catholic extremism can be found, such as anti-Jesuit and anti-Marian." Weitzman is especially concerned with "the amalgamation of antisemitism and anti-Catholicism." He notes the homepage of Michael Hoffman's Campaign for Radical Truth in History.⁴³ Describing Hoffman's site as "one of the most virulently antisemitic on the Internet," Weitzman cites an article, "John Paul II: Judas Iscariot of our Time." "The Pope is accused of 'preaching a false gospel,' of 'negating and betraying...sacred scripture.' Of 'fraud,' Why is the pontiff thus excoriated? Because he is in 'obeisance to the Talmudic Pharisees of today...the direct spiritual heirs of the assassins of Jesus Christ.' He 'is completely smitten with...the Jewish world leadership. He caters to and pimps for them.' More specifically, Hoffman is reacting to the Vatican statement of November 2, 1997, that 'Christians who yield to anti-Judaism offend God and the Church itself.' According to Hoffman, by 'discarding the traditional Christian (view), John Paul II has virtually admitted, by his actions, that the Pharisees were right to crucify Christ.'"

The question is always asked: why is anti-Catholicism so persistent? Why are we finding it so prevalent today on the Internet? The primary reason is that anti-Catholicism is a part of our cultural inheritance. William Bradford's famous

"Of the Plymouth Plantation" – the history of the Plymouth Colony from 1620-1647 by its governor – is considered a seminal document of American thought and culture, giving tremendous insight into the ideas that helped to create America. It describes the voyage of the Pilgrims on the Mayflower, and the trials of the establishment of the colony. Yet, in its very first sentence, it refers to "the gross darkness of popery which had covered and overspread the Christian world."⁴⁴ this anti-Catholic mentality has never disappeared from American thinking and it remains an intransigent part of American thought. Most of all, however, it is so persistent because it is not merely the perspective of the uneducated or the ill informed. Anti-Catholicism remains an effective tool of America's elite. In that sense, it is allowed to persist because it remains acceptable. The anti-Catholic bigotry of a Jack Chick and a Michael Hoffman are easier to condemn.

However, anti-Catholicism is not confined solely to those fringes on the Internet. There are any number of strictly secular websites with particular secular agendas that routinely engage in anti-Catholic rhetoric. Public activist organizations such as the National Abortion Rights Action League or the National Education Association routinely employ anti-Catholicism in their public positions. The website for the gay newspaper *The Advocate*⁴⁵ reproduced a recent commentary from the newspaper by Michael Signorille. Called "benevolent hatemongers,"⁴⁶ the author attacked Pope John Paul II for his comments on the gay pride march in Rome during the Jubilee Year. While decrying alleged "hate speech," Signorille engages in rhetoric not dissimilar to Hoffman, saying that Pope John Paul II "revealed before the whole world that he is a hateful man...(his hatred is) no different from Stalin's or even Hitler's...But the fact that the pope is a virulent hatemonger is something that religious and political leaders don't dare admit – though they may privately agree – lest they be labeled

attackers of the all-powerful Catholic Church.”⁴⁷ This is not taking issue. This is not disagreement. This is simply anti-Catholic hate speech.

SUMMARY POINTS

There are anti-Semitic sites on the Internet and sites that engage in other forms of racism. That has been well documented. Virtually ignored, however, is the abundance of anti-Catholicism that exists on the Internet.

The pervasiveness of anti-Catholicism on the Internet reflects how deeply entrenched, obsessive and normative this prejudice is within contemporary culture. If the Internet is our most contemporary means of communication and information gathering, then anti-Catholicism is entering the new Millenium in a powerful fashion.

The post-Reformation period of the mid 16th and 17th Seventeenth centuries saw a wealth of anti-Catholic published material that would establish the foundation for anti-Catholic historical and cultural assumptions that are now moving to the Internet.

In recent years, with the advent of cable television and a change in the culture of movie making, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of anti-Catholic imagery and rhetoric in popular media. The short-lived television program *That's Life* on ABC and movies such as *Dogma* and *Quills* evidenced a new willingness to engage in anti-Catholicism in entertainment aimed at a general audience.

By its nature, the Internet is unregulated. It is the dumping

ground for the effluvia of Western culture. There is no editing for truth, objectivity, reliability or responsibility on the Internet. With its millions of websites, personal home pages and search portals, it is impossible to monitor or respond in any consistent fashion to its content.

Traditional anti-Catholicism – fundamentalist attacks on the Church as the scriptural “whore of Babylon” – bubbles just below the surface in many areas of our society. This traditional anti-Catholicism created many of the myths of anti-Catholicism that linger within the culture: the Church as solely interested in power; Catholicism as an “alien” religion in America; Catholicism as the enemy of separation of Church and State (as well as the public school system); the Catholic Church as oppressor.

The nature of the Internet leads to a generally more coarse standard even with so-called mainstream Internet sites. Profanity, obscenity and nudity are commonplace while they remain less so in newspapers that are still viewed as “family reading.” Of course, that bar has been lowered in recent years in newspapers but it is a standard far higher than “legitimate” sites on the Internet.

Traditional anti-Catholicism laid the foundation for the common secular anti-Catholicism of contemporary culture. Stripped of its theological foundation, it portrays the Church as a medieval relic, the enemy of science and individual freedom. Born in the pseudo-scientism of the 19th Century – with its mix of nationalism, racism and class warfare – it focused on the Church as the enemy of modern thought and progress. Developed during the eugenics, birth control and pro-abortion crusades of the 20th century, it reached its contemporary culmination in various theories of sexual liberation. It is widespread in contemporary thought and sees anti-Catholicism not as a prejudice, but as a tool to be utilized to denigrate Church teaching in the public arena.

The number of sophomoric sites spewing anti-Catholicism and generally anti-Christian views is legion. Run either as one-man shows on personal websites or organized more professionally for profit, these sites are generally witless attempts at satire.

In mind-numbing detail are a host of traditional anti-Catholic sites. From rural churches and personal websites, to sites for fundamentalist publishing houses, the traditional anti-Catholicism that was said to have died with the election of John F. Kennedy in 1960 thrives on the Internet. A major website is for the Jack Chick Company. Chick does not bother to engage in honest dialogue, or honest argument, over Catholic beliefs. The Chick website, like so many others, peddles bombastic charges against the Church as knowingly teaching false doctrine and purposely sending souls to hell.

Much of the anti-Catholicism on the traditionalist Internet sites is not, for the most part, an attempt to theologically engage Catholicism, a perfectly legitimate and sadly necessary discussion in a divided Christianity. This is simply old-time anti-Catholic nativism that has a primary form of argument that refers to Catholicism as a conscious, knowing Satanic plot to undermine Scripture. Such leaves little room for healthy and honest exchanges.

An army of individual pastors and their local churches have put up sites dedicated to tradition anti-Catholicism. One of the most loathsome is from Pastor Fred Phelps' Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka, Kansas. Phelps has made a name for himself for decidedly homophobic hate speech. Its Internet address is godhatesfags.org. Phelps refers to the Catholic Church as a "fag" church and claims that a third of Catholic priests are actively homosexual, seducing young boys and women.

There are numerous websites by alleged ex-Catholics that engage in evangelization aimed specifically at Catholics. Most

use anti-Catholicism as their primary means of attack. Very few rely on a positive presentation of a faith to which they hope to convert Catholics. For the most part, they simply – very simply – attack Catholic beliefs, present a distorted view of Catholic practices, and re-write history from an anti-Catholic perspective.

The common thread running through these “conversion” sites is the viciousness of the attacks on Catholic beliefs and practices. These sites present an image of Catholic beliefs as essentially pagan. They constantly portray the Catholic priesthood as corrupted by sexual deviancy and the Church as a conscious effort to deceive people in order to oppress them.

Anti-Catholicism also finds its way into the Internet’s crazy world of militia groups and radical right-wing zealots. Though much time is spent on these pages with anti-Semitism and racism, Catholicism shares in their vicious attacks.

There are websites from traditionalist Catholic groups that often borrow the language and approach of traditional anti-Catholic sites. Some of these sites represent followers of the late Archbishop Lefebvre and are formally schismatic. Their primary aim is to attack the Church today as being heretical and the Mass as celebrated contrary to traditional Catholic teaching. Their attacks on the Church and its members are vehement, and often raise accusations of “Masonic conspiracies” or satanic infiltration.

From the ex-Catholic left, the attacks on the Internet are mostly from a secular perspective, and usually driven by pro-abortion or a gay agenda. Sites for “recovering Catholics” simply assume that any thinking person will have left the Church, and offer advice often centered on a supposed sexual liberation.

Anti-Catholicism remains an effective tool of America’s elite. In that sense, it is allowed to persist because it remains

acceptable. The anti-Catholic bigotry of a Jack Chick is easy to condemn. But anti-Catholicism is not confined solely to those fringes on the Internet. There are any number of strictly secular websites with particular secular agendas that routinely engage in anti-Catholic rhetoric.

FOOTNOTES

¹ See *The Reformation*, Will Durant (Simon & Schuster, 1957, 1985) pp. 156-158

² *ibid.* p. 159

³ On the following All Saints Day, November 1, the collection of relics of the Elector of Wittenberg would be displayed and Luther believed he could attract a wide immediate audience for his views.

⁴ See *Inquisition*, by Edward Peters (University of California Press, 1987) pp. 144-154

⁵ The *Awful Disclosures* was second in sales only to "Uncle Tom's Cabin" prior to the Civil War.

⁶ For an overview of anti-Catholic publishing in the United States see *Anti-Catholicism in American Culture*, ed. Robert P. Lockwood (Our Sunday Visitor, 2000) pp. 30-45)

⁷ See The Annual Report of the Catholic League for Religious

and Civil Rights, 1998 and 1999 for descriptions of *Dogma* and *That's Life*, and additional examples.

⁸ Reed's book is available through Ayer Publications which produces a number of historical studies on anti-Catholicism, such as Ray Allen Billington's original study of the origins of anti-Catholic Nativism in the early 19th Century.

⁹ *The Virgin Spring*, by Lorelei Shannon

¹⁰ July 17, 2000 MensJournal, portrait of British comedian Eddie Izzard

¹¹ theonion.com

¹² *The Onion*, November 15, 2000

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ angelfire.com/mn/psychospeak/catholic.html

¹⁵ rossetta.com

¹⁶ chick.com

¹⁷ Chiniquy was a renegade priest who left after arguing with his bishop over parish assignments. He wrote "Fifty Years in the Church of Rome" after the Civil War. It was the source of the infamous – and fabricated – prophecy of Abraham Lincoln of a "dark cloud" coming over America from Rome. Chiniquy was still on the anti-Catholic preaching circuit in the early 19th century under the auspices of the American Protective Association (APA), a short-lived anti-Catholic populist movement.

¹⁸ jesus-is-lord.com

¹⁹ A biography of Bishop John F. Noll, bishop of the Fort Wayne, IN diocese and founder of Our Sunday Visitor (With Ink and Crosier, Our Sunday Visitor 1952), by Richard Ginder contains a series of stories of the young Father Noll dealing with “ex-priests” in rural Indiana.

²⁰ [jesus-is-lord](#) homepage counter as of November 17, 2000 over a two-year period

²¹ [harborlighthouse.org](#)

²² Ibid.

²³ [cuttingedge.org](#)

²⁴ [aomin.org](#)

²⁵ Pope Honorius is raised in numerous anti-Catholic websites of an apologetic nature. His pontificate was dominated by the Monophysite heresy over the dual nature of Christ. Traditional Catholic teaching is that Christ has a dual nature, human and divine. The Monophysite heresy claimed His nature was solely divine. In a letter to Patriarch Sergius of Constantinople Honorius referred to Christ’s nature as indivisible and as having “one will.” His views were later condemned. This was hardly a papal pronouncement under the conditions required for infallible papal statements, but it is held to be such by those attacking the doctrine.

²⁶ [reformation.org](#)

²⁷ [balaamsass.org](#)

²⁸ [lamblion.com](#)

²⁹ [ibid.](#) Mission Statement

³⁰ **Ibid.**

³¹ **whpub.com**

³² **ibid. Publications**

³³ **biblebelievers.com/falsedoctrine.html**

³⁴ **stas.net/goodnews**

³⁵ **pro-gospel.org**

³⁶ **ibid. Homepage counter as of November 17, 2000**

³⁷ **excatholicsforchrist.org**

³⁸ **gnfc.org**

³⁹ **geocities.com/heartland/plains2594/**

⁴⁰ **sd.znet.com/-bart**

⁴¹ **freeamerican.com**

⁴² **wiesenthal.com/watch/inveetedimage.html**

⁴³ **hoffman-info.com/christian1/html**

⁴⁴ **Of Plymouth Plantation, 1620-1647, by William Bradford
(Alfred A. Knopf, April 2000. Twelfth edition)**

⁴⁵ **advocate.com**

⁴⁶ ***The Advocate*, September 12, 2000**

⁴⁷ **Signorille based his comments on papal remarks on July 9,**

2000. The full text of the statement by Pope John Paul II that led Signorille to engage in this viscous hate speech, comparing the pope to Hitler and Stalin, was: "I feel obliged now to mention the well-known demonstrations held in Rome in the past few days. In the name of the Church of Rome I can only express my deep sadness at the affront of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000 and the offence to the Christian values of a city that is so dear to the hearts of Catholics throughout the world. The Church cannot be silent about the truth, because she would fail in her fidelity to God the Creator and would not help to distinguish good from evil. In this regard, I wish merely to read what is said in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, which, after noting that homosexual acts are contrary to the natural law, then states: 'The number of men and women who have deep-seated homosexual tendencies is not negligible. This inclination, which is objectively disordered, constitutes for most of them a trial. They must be accepted with respect, compassion and sensitivity. Every sign of unjust discrimination in their regard should be avoided. These persons are called to fulfill God's will in their lives and, if they are Christians, to unite to the sacrifice of the Lord's Cross the difficulties they may encounter from their condition.'"