

# ATHEISM, ANTI-CATHOLICISM AND PARANOIA

*by William A. Donohue*

At the conclusion of John M. Swomley's article in the January/February edition of *The Humanist*, the credits read that he is "emeritus professor of social ethics at St. Paul School of Theology in Kansas City, Missouri, and president of Americans for Religious Liberty." It would be more accurate to say that Swomley is one of the most prominent atheists in the United States, a long-time ACLU extremist whose understanding of social ethics is on a par with Father Ray's appreciation for the Magisterium. It should also be said that Americans for Religious Liberty represents religious liberty in the same way that the People's Republic of China represents the Chinese people.

If these conclusions seem harsh, it is only because the evidence that supports them is overwhelming. The very title of Swomley's piece on the Catholic League, "A League of the Pope's Own," gives the reader a clear indication of what animates this atheist: the league is not an independent lay Catholic civil rights organization, it is a lackey of the papacy.

Swomley begins his article with boilerplate. "One of the least known and most dangerous of the far-right organizations," he writes, "is the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights." Sounds like Swomley is drinking from the same cup that allowed Hillary to imagine about a "vast right-wing conspiracy." In any event, all along I thought we were just a bunch of Catholics who were tired of being kicked around. Now I know better.

Swomley thinks the league is "little known" because "it

masquerades as a civil rights organization,” and is dangerous because “it redefines religious and civil rights as opposites to those normally understood as constitutional rights.” Now this sounds like a job for the FBI, not a professor of social ethics. But Swomley is up to the task, convincing his fellow believers in nothing that he has uncovered the hidden agenda of this nefarious band of KKKatholics.

Want to know what the league does for a living? “Chiefly, its mission is to censor or suppress any activity, language, speech, publication, or media presentation that it considers offensive to the papacy, the Vatican or the Catholic Church in America.” Never mind that the league persistently forswears any appetite for censorship, and never mind that Swomley can’t cite a single instance to buttress his case, the point he wants to make is that the league must be stopped before America is overrun by those papal loyalists. Here are the ground rules: when Jewish and black civil rights organizations protest bigotry, that’s free speech; when Catholics do so, it’s censorship.

I did not know it until I read it, but Swomley says that when I took over the league in 1993, I did so with “the assistance of Robert Destra [sic] as general counsel.” For the record, Bob was never my general counsel and he has no “a” in his surname. Robert Destro, a very bright law school professor, moved from the league’s board of directors to the board of advisors shortly after I joined the organization.

More important, Swomley argues that I have “worked hard to redefine civil liberties away from individual rights so as to oppose affirmative action, gay rights, women’s rights, freedom of speech, and freedom of the press.” Once again, no evidence is forthcoming. As readers of *Catalyst* know, the league never comments on affirmative action anymore than it takes a position on global warming. As for gay rights and women’s rights, the league is agnostic, taking no stand save for those instances when militant gays and feminists start bashing the

Church. Moreover, freedom of speech and freedom of the press are integral to the First Amendment, and the league is supportive of such constitutional rights.

Swomley quotes the league's by-laws but fails to mention that the ones he cites are from 1973. In another sleight of hand, he quotes a phrase from Canon Law 1369 about just punishment for blasphemy, and then claims, without warrant, that the league "exists in response" to this Canon (where he dreamed this one up, I do not know).

After the pope came to the United States in 1995, the league commented that the media had generally been fair. This unexceptional observation is read by Swomley as proof that the Catholic League "intimidated the press." Furthermore, when I wrote that "The relatively few cheap shots that were taken at the Pope by the media in October is testimony to a change in the culture," Swomley put the following spin on this sentence: "In other words, the 'change in the culture' is the elevation of the pope and church hierarchy to a position above criticism." He seems to prefer a world where anti-Catholicism is accepted to a world where tolerance is achieved, because in his mind, tolerance for Catholicism is equivalent to the establishment of a privileged position for the pope.

When I complain about a news story that gratuitously cites the Roman Catholic affiliation of a judge who rules against the legality of assisted suicide, Swomley reads this as a "threat to the American press." This is another example of his ethics: Swomley would never think of applying his "principle" to blacks when they justifiably complain about news reports that unnecessarily cite the African American heritage of a defendant.

Over and over again, Swomley associates league criticism of Catholic bashing with an attempt to censor (the thrust of this charge, which is increasingly being made, is actually to quash the league's speech). He even objects to the league's right to

call for a boycott of the sponsors of "Nothing Sacred." Yet, whenever anyone else calls for a boycott, that's free speech; when we do so, it's tantamount to fascism. This isn't Situation Ethics, it's Ethics for Some and None for Others.

A while back, the Catholic League was upset with the ADL for reneging on an award it promised author Richard Lukas for his splendid book, *Did the Children Cry? Hitler's War Against Jewish and Polish Children*. The ADL reneged because it thought the book wasn't sufficiently appreciative of the anti-Semitic strain in Polish history (after a protest, mounted in part by the league, Lukas got the award). In an amazing twist of facts, Swomley accuses the league of criticizing the ADL for presenting the award to Lukas! Not without significance, he says that the league "even" attacked the ADL, as if "the Jewish organization" (as he calls it) was somehow off-limits.

The conspiratorial mind of Professor Swomley is perhaps best revealed in his statement that "the Catholic League's main office is listed as 1011 First Avenue, which is the headquarters of Cardinal John O'Connor's archdiocese"; he says he picked up this inside information from "a directory of right-wing Catholic organizations" published by Catholics for a Free Choice (wait till he finds out that our office is adjacent to the Cardinal's!).

So what does Swomley make of all this? "In short," he concludes, "that address increasingly has been the target for censorship of any critique of the Catholic church and for the establishment of a Catholic culture as the norm in American public relations." These are the guns of war: our ethicist is taking aim at those subversives working out of the New York Catholic Command Center.

Swomley ends his creative diatribe by exclaiming, "There is a serious danger to any society or government when the leaders of any church or secret organization under its control can intimidate and suppress information and opinion." This has me

confused. If the Catholic League is a secret organization, then why is it housed in “the headquarters of Cardinal John O’Connor’s archdiocese”? Why wouldn’t it take up quarters in a tunnel below Penn Station?

It is impossible to separate Swomley’s paranoia from his anti-Catholicism. Indeed, the latter partly explains the former. But because not all anti-Catholics are paranoid, there is something else at work here. And that something else is called atheism. Yes, there are atheists who are not anti-Catholic, just as there are anti-Catholics who are not paranoid. But when there is a blend of atheism and anti-Catholicism, a strain of paranoia is almost always detectable.

Professor Swomley sports graduate degrees and prefers the pen to the sword. Klansmen sport white sheets and prefer the sword to the pen. Aside from that, there isn’t much that separates them, and on the scale of bigotry and paranoia, they’re twin cousins. Indeed, they have so much in common that they are likely to meet again in the next life (sorry for the bad news, professor). Exactly where I really can’t say. I just hope I don’t run into them.