

NEO-ANTI-CATHOLICISM

There are many genres of anti-Catholicism, the most well-known of which are discriminatory practices against individual Catholics and bigoted assaults on the institutional Church. Both forms continue to exist, but the contemporary strain of Catholic bashing that is most common, if less visible, is best understood as a manifestation of cultural politics.

Culture is an expression of all that constitutes our way of life. Politics speaks to the use of power, exercised by individuals and institutions in society. Cultural politics is the political use of cultural symbols and ideas to fashion, or, more typically, refashion, society according to the vision of those exercising power. It is based on the assumption that changes in the culture precede institutional changes. To put it differently, if we undergo a change in the way we look at the institutions in which we live, then it is entirely possible that we will accept, even demand, changes that fit with our new vision of reality.

Here's an example of what I mean. Today, smoking is prohibited in many restaurants, workplaces and airports. These institutional changes followed a long campaign by anti-smoking forces to change the way Americans think about smoking. The campaign included a determination by Hollywood to show fewer people smoking on TV and in the movies, educational programs aimed at young people, etc. In short, first we changed our thinking, then we changed our rules and laws.

Here's the connection with today's anti-Catholicism: currently, there is a strong attempt being waged by those who don't like various aspects of Catholicism to change the way we think about our Church, the long-term purpose of which is to get us to accept the kinds of institutional changes that the commandants of the culture want so badly. Though this type of anti-Catholicism is less palpable than previous efforts, its

effect is just as lethal.

To be specific, it is the anti-Catholicism that emanates from the entertainment industry, the artistic community and literary quarters that typifies Catholic bashing in the late twentieth century. Sometimes subtle, sometimes not, what makes it different from previous expressions of anti-Catholicism is that this one is less likely to be seen as a frontal assault. But that's exactly why it's so invidious: it's a type of guerrilla warfare being played out on the screen, the canvas and the keyboard.

Many of today's TV shows and movies that discuss Catholicism are not anti-Catholic in the traditional use of that term. But they do qualify as neo-anti-Catholicism insofar as they are a good example of the kind of cultural politics that should concern every member of the Catholic League. When the executive producers of "Nothing Sacred" comment that the purpose of the show is to provoke "dialogue where little exists," it's clear that what is at work is an attempt to alter the way the public, and most especially Catholics, look at certain Church teachings.

This strategy owes a lot to Antonio Gramsci. Gramsci was an early twentieth century Marxist who differed with Marx on how to revolutionize capitalist societies. Marx believed that the proletariat, the urban working class, would eventually become so exploited that they would band together and overthrow the ruling class. Gramsci put his hope not in the proletariat but in those who took command of the channels of communication. By radicalizing cultural institutions and changing people's values and morals, the way to real institutional change would be paved.

It now makes sense why artists and novelists continue to rail against the Church. Many of them hate the way the Church operates and have special contempt for its teachings on sexuality. They reason that if they can reorient the public's

perception of Catholicism, they will have laid the groundwork for the kinds of changes they seek. This is most easily seen in the work of artists and novelists who were raised Catholic, turned against the Church with a vengeance, and are working out their adolescent rage with the fervor of Bible-thumping minister.

What's at stake for us is obvious. These nouveau bigots are quick to wrap themselves in the First Amendment. That's okay—we should respect their right to exercise their freedom of speech against us. But we should not do so lying down. Instead, we should go right at them, using our First Amendment right to expose them for the operators that they are: by unmasking their agenda we can subvert their experiment in cultural politics and send them back to the drawing board. After all, there's no reason to believe why Gramsci should prove to be any more successful than Marx.