

CATHOLIC BASHING ON CAMPUS

It's not unusual for colleges to become a breeding ground for anti-Catholicism. Recently, New York's Cooper Union and the University of South Carolina-Sumter proved themselves no exceptions. These two schools, the beneficiaries of federal tax monies, awarded their students, under the guise of free speech, a platform to spout off their anti-Catholic vitriol.

From May 27 to June 10, The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art hosted an exhibition of student art on their campus in Manhattan. Although student art was on display, not every student's work made the cut. The school's website said of the event: "The School of Art faculty have selected major pieces by students representing 'the best of' each discipline ranging from sculpture, graphic design and painting to video installations. Young artists' work will include both individual and collaborative efforts, illustrating the school's continuing role as an incubator of significant artists...." An example of the institution's "best" art took a patently obscene cheap shot at Catholicism.

A series of paintings by Felipe Baeza was selected to be displayed at the exhibition. In one of his paintings, Baeza showed a man with his pants pulled down with a crucifix extended from his rectum. Under the painting was the phrase, "el dia que me converti catolico," or "The day I became a Catholic." Baeza had other similar paintings. One substituted a Rosary for the crucifix that extended from his rectum; another showed a man with his pants down and an angel holding two Rosaries with a penis attached to each of them; and there was a painting of a naked man with an erection and a halo hovering his head.

The fact that these works were deemed "major," and represented the "best of" the student contributions, does not speak well for Cooper Union. Throughout history, art has traditionally

been understood as conveying beauty. Now art has been mixed with junk and these paintings are a perfect example of that. Admittedly, there is so much junk that passes for art these days that the public can be forgiven if it is no longer capable of making that distinction.

Further down the Atlantic Seaboard at the University of South Carolina's Sumter campus, anti-Catholicism took a different shape.

In May the school published its annual student literary magazine *The Sandhill*. According to the school's handbook, the magazine contains manuscripts, artwork and photographs from the student body that have been judged anonymously by student editors. This year's winner of the Sandhill Award for Poetry went to George C. Floyd who had three poems published: "A Bloody Period," "Fish Out of Water" and "Counterfeit Christians," the last one containing his Christian bashing. "Counterfeit Christians" rails on Christians as being intolerant of Muslims, disrespecting Buddha and having less insight than a sleeping atheist. But Floyd held his punches for the Catholic Church until his last stanza:

*A good atheist sleeping good at night
has more insight than a believer stealing spotlight.
Keys to resting in peace have many versions,
and it's not necessarily urging virgins to be alone.
Especially when a catholic priest manipulates
a small boy to get his freak on.*

The most disturbing part about both of these stories is that these schools receive direct funding from the federal government. The University of South Carolina is a public university funded by the state and Cooper Union has received over \$4.6 million in federal aid over the past eight years. According to the Cybercast News Service, some of the funding to Cooper Union came in the form of federal grants from the National Endowment for the Arts.

The fact that these students were rewarded for their anti-Catholicism does not speak well for their respective institutions. On the other hand, we have a sneaking suspicion that these items made the cut precisely because they attacked Catholic sensibilities. It can be assured that if these pieces had targeted Muhammad they would have been rejected.

COMEDIANS GIVE MUSLIMS A PASS

In June, Lewis Black, a repeat Catholic offender, released his new book, *Me of Little Faith*. In the book, Black holds no punches when it comes to attacking the Catholic Church, Orthodox Jews and Mormonism. But when it comes to Islam, Black gives the religion a pass.

Black's chapter on Islam, titled "Islam. All I'm Saying Is, I Got Nothing to Say," is the shortest in the book. The chapter, which is only three paragraphs long, begins with the following: "I have nothing to say. Nothing. And let's leave it that way." But yet Black has no problem saying that the "history of the Catholic Church is littered with more bull****" than he can put up with or that the Church has a "history of being greedy and violent and underhanded and a home for sexual predators."

Black's book was endorsed by the late George Carlin, who died on June 22. Carlin trashed religion for decades, but like Black he had no stomach for bashing Islam. Indeed, he justified Muslim violence. He readily admitted, "When all those beheadings started in Iraq it didn't bother me." In fact, the beheadings were easy to explain: "You strap on a gun and go struttin' around some other men's country you better be ready for some action Jack." Catholics, however, were never

the victims in Carlin's playbook—they were always the victimizers.

The pass that Bill Maher has given Islam takes it a step further—Maher understands the difference between Muslim violence and Islam. Maher said, “I don't think the hate that comes from the Muslim world comes from religion.” But Maher has never cut Catholics a break when they have acted irresponsibly—their behavior is *caused* by their religion.

The most sickening of this is the spectacle of pundits that congratulated these comedians for “pushing the envelope” and being countercultural. There is nothing courageous about pushing buttons that everyone knows are safe.

BISHOPS RESTATE PREEMINENCE OF LIFE ISSUES

On June 13, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops struck a blow to the culture of death by reaffirming its rejection of embryonic stem cell research and human cloning.

It was important for all Catholics to acknowledge that the first and most important issues affecting public policy are the life issues. To maintain that other issues i.e., poverty and housing, are the moral equivalent of matters like abortion, embryonic stem cell research, human cloning and direct euthanasia, is to denigrate the privileged position that the life issues have in Catholic teachings.

In the statement, *On Embryonic Stem Cell Research*, the bishops referred to the harvesting of embryonic stem cells as “the deliberate killing of innocent human beings, a gravely immoral

act.” They also said that “Human cloning is intrinsically evil,” something which “shows disrespect for human life in the very act of generating it.” These words were chosen carefully, and they reflect the sentiments of Pope Benedict XVI who recently stated abortion was a “non-negotiable” issue for Catholics.

The life issues are of preeminent importance to Catholics. For one to discuss social justice, for example, while dismissing the life issues is profoundly un-Catholic.

WILL MCCAIN AND OBAMA RESPECT CHURCHES?

In June, the Paul B. Henry Institute for the Study of Christianity and Politics at Calvin College released a survey that reported 57 percent of Americans believe that religious leaders should not support political candidates during worship services. The findings of this poll had grave implications for anyone who decides to run for public office.

Sen. John McCain and Sen. Barack Obama should set an example by pledging never to attend a church service that is a front for a political rally. Too often, clergy have abused their office by making veiled endorsements—and in some cases explicit endorsements—of candidates for public office at a church service. Just as bad has been the practice of the candidates themselves making a pitch to the congregation from the pulpit.

In the Henry survey, not a single demographic category could marshal majority support for the proposition that “Clergy should be permitted to endorse political candidates during

worship services.” The categories included the following: Evangelical Protestants, Mainline Protestants, Latino Protestants, Black Protestants, Catholics, Latino Catholics, Other Christians, Other Faiths, Jews and Unaffiliated; subcategories were listed in some instances. Of all the groups, Catholics and Jews had the best record.

In this regard, the Catholic Church is a model for all other religions. While it is not uncommon for Protestant churches (especially African American ones) and Jewish synagogues to be used as a political forum, it is almost non-existent in the Catholic community. Moreover, unlike others, the Catholic clergy are barred from holding public office. In 1980, Pope John Paul II mandated that all priests withdraw from electoral politics; this stricture is recognized in Canon Law.

The American people have spoken and their voice was made clear. If McCain and Obama continue their practice of turning houses of worship into political playing fields, they should be roundly criticized for doing so.

SALLY QUINN’S NARCISSISM

On June 18, the funeral Mass for NBC correspondent Tim Russert was held at Trinity Church in Georgetown. Attending the funeral was Sally Quinn. She is a *Washington Post* journalist and founder and co-moderator of “On Faith”, a *Washington Post* and *Newsweek* blog.

Quinn, who was an atheist most of her life, posted on June 23 why she decided to go to Communion at the Mass: “Last Wednesday I was determined to take it [the Eucharist] for Tim, transubstantiation notwithstanding. I’m so glad I did. It made me feel closer to him. And it was worth it just to imagine how

he would have loved it.”

Quinn also admitted the following: “I had only taken communion once in my life, at an evangelical church. It was soon after I had started ‘On Faith’ and I wanted to see what it was like. Oddly I had a slightly nauseated sensation after I took it, knowing that in some way it represented the body and blood of Jesus Christ.”

Just reading what Sally Quinn said is enough to give any Christian, especially Catholics, more than a “slightly nauseating sensation.” In her privileged world, life is all about experiences and feelings.

Moreover, Quinn’s statement not only reeks of narcissism, it shows profound disrespect for Catholics and the beliefs they hold dear. If she really wanted to get close to Tim Russert, she could have found a way to do so without trampling on Catholic sensibilities. Like praying for him—that’s what Catholics do.

RELIGIOUS RIGHTS FOR GITMO MUSLIMS?

On June 19, the McClatchy Company, which owns 30 daily newspapers, completed a five-day series on the living conditions of suspected terrorists held at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba; the reporting was based on an eight-month investigation. Needless to say, the series painted a negative picture.

Among the things that troubled McClatchy was “the Americans’ ignorance of Islamic customs and a pattern of interrupting prayers, shaving off prisoners’ beards and searching their

copies of the Quran.” Now, this complaint would have struck us as legitimate if it had come from a source that was well known for its sensitivity to religious liberty issues. But this was not the case.

All of the following examples are from McClatchy outlets:

- A few months ago, a *Miami Herald* editorial opined against a proposal that would rid the Florida Constitution of its bigoted Blaine amendment provision barring public monies to religious schools.
- In 2003, in the *Star Telegram* (TX), one of its feature writers feared that if the Supreme Court allowed school vouchers to parochial schools, it would “demolish whatever is left of the wall separating church and state.”
- In April, an editorial in the *Sun-Sentinel* (FL) said that a proposed “I Believe” license plate “thoroughly demolishes the church-state wall.”
- Last year, an editorial in the *Roanoke Times* (VA) cited church and state concerns when it commented “Candidates prostrate themselves before the terrestrial thrones of Christian leaders seeking their blessings.” This same newspaper ran an editorial in 2006 on “Christmas Bullies” fighting the “War on Christmas.”

So when it comes to Christian concerns, McClatchy shudders over the collapsing church and state wall. But when it comes to suspected Muslim terrorists, it wants to make sure their prayers aren’t interrupted. Never mind that their prayer books—and the prayer rugs they kneel on for that matter—are paid for by the American taxpayers.

McClatchy’s blatant bias against Christianity was only par for the course. For years media outlets have taken a hands off approach when it comes to criticizing Muslims, but they hold no reservations when it comes to denouncing Christianity.

THE THREAT OF THE NEW ATHEISM

BY MIKE SULLIVAN

Scott Hahn & Benjamin Wiker: *Answering the New Atheism: Dismantling Dawkins' Case Against God*, Emmaus Road Publishing

Is it time to crack down on religion?

After all, religion is responsible for all the trouble in the world, isn't it? The September 11 attacks were in the name of religion. Galileo was silenced in the name of religion. Everywhere you look in the world, you see riots, and massacres, and wars—all in the name of religion. It's not just one religion, either—it's all religions.

Religion is at the root of every problem in the world. It's time we got rid of religion.

Now, if all that seems like a shallow argument to you, it's probably because you spent half a minute thinking about it. Many of the conflicts in the world today are religious, that's true. But it wasn't too long ago that the great danger facing the world was institutional atheism. Half the world was officially Communist and anti-religious. We can imagine that religion is the root of all evil only if we forget Stalin and Mao and Pol Pot.

Nevertheless, some of the brightest minds in the English-speaking world right now argue that religion is the problem. And we know they're the brightest minds because they keep telling us they are.

Atheism is certainly nothing new. Long before the time of Christ, the ancient Athenians were charging inconvenient

philosophers with “atheism.” So there was a word for people who didn’t believe in any gods—the same word we use today, in fact.

We hear charges of “atheism” at least as far back as the 6th century B.C. Plato talks about people who say that the universe arose “not through intelligence...nor through some god, nor through art, but...by nature and chance.” Plato’s own teacher Socrates was accused of atheism, although the Socrates who appears in Plato’s dialogues is far from an atheist.

Most of the ancient philosophers whose works have survived are not explicitly atheist, but some are close. Epicurus and Lucretius, for example, allowed for gods in their system, but not gods who cared at all about humanity. The universe was created by random collisions of atoms, not by an almighty Creator. Whatever gods there might be were indifferent to what we did.

These ancient atheists grew out of a pagan culture, so if they were rebels, they were naturally rebelling against the colorful stories of pagan mythology. The Middle Ages didn’t have time for atheist philosophy, so atheism died with the ancients.

Modern atheism arose about five hundred years ago in the midst of a Christian culture, and hence defined itself by an explicit rejection of Christianity. Some religious philosophers, like the Deists, rejected the Triune God of Christian doctrine, but accepted that there was a God. But there were others—pure atheists—who completely rejected belief in any deity at all. Both groups rejected and rebelled against Christianity.

The French Revolution showed what atheism is capable of when it combined theory with unchecked power. Bishops and priests were executed, religious rounded up, churches desecrated, all in the name of liberating the people from tyranny. Never mind

that the people themselves were tenaciously religious. The people must be liberated in spite of themselves.

In the 1800s, Karl Marx and other thinkers systematized this anti-religious hostility. When the followers of Marx gained power in Russia, they were even more ruthless than the French revolutionaries in their suppression of religion. Similar horrors followed dogmatic Communism wherever it came to power.

But most of the English-speaking world was spared this excessive institutional atheism. The United States, in particular, has always zealously guarded the freedom of anyone to practice any religion that does not seriously interfere with public order.

That's why we're so surprised and baffled by what we call the New Atheism. For the first time in our relatively tranquil history, we're facing a determined attempt not just to keep organized religion out of government (which most religious Americans agree is a good idea), but to suppress religion completely.

Led by the Four Horsemen, as they like to call themselves—Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris, and Daniel Dennett—these New Atheists argue that religion, is simply delusion and at the root of all our problems. They have websites and well-orchestrated media events, and collectively they sell millions of books. Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion* has been on the bestseller list since its release in 2006.

The New Atheists are positively evangelical. They want to make a convert out of you, although if you're a "dyed-in-the-wool faith-head" they'll settle for peppering you with insults and sarcasm instead.

But if atheists have always been with us, why are we worrying now? After all, the Church has engaged non-believers for over two thousand years.

What we call the “New Atheism” is a bit different than its predecessor. It’s more aggressive, and it has more power. The leaders of the sect are well placed in the academic world, and they have a strong determination to mold government policy.

And you wouldn’t like the government if the New Atheists molded its policy. Richard Dawkins has asserted that teaching your religion to your child is a form of child abuse and should be criminalized. Other New Atheists have argued that churches should have to post a sign reading “for entertainment purposes only,” since after all they’re no less a fraud than telephone psychics.

The New Atheists see religion as a disease to be exterminated. Their dream, in short, is not a government neutral to religion, but a government actively hostile to religion.

What is most worrying is that the New Atheists seem to gain the most followers precisely among the most ambitious and intelligent young people—the people who will be actively shaping government policy in the years to come. Attracted by the intellectual rebelliousness of the movement, young people fall for its insidious message: join us and you can be one of the *smart* people.

How do we counter the New Atheists where they’re doing the most damage?

First, we need to be polite. That’s all the more important when our opponents descend to the level of playground taunts. If a New Atheist joins our discussion, we need to be welcoming, not hostile. We need to act like Christians, which is all the harder when our opponents have no such limitations. But we must remember that, with truth there is strength. We Christians don’t need to resort to playground taunts, cheap shots, or to hostile defensiveness. We have the truth and we are called to share it.

Once we’ve determined to be polite, we need to answer reasoned

arguments with reason. There's a real need for good resources to counter the atheists' favorite arguments. Scott Hahn and Benjamin Wiker have blazed the trail in *Answering the New Atheism*, in which they counter Richard Dawkins' surprisingly feeble arguments in *The God Delusion*.

This is a good way to start. Hahn and Wiker are never afraid to meet Dawkins head-on. They take his favorite arguments and show us where the holes are, meeting reason with reason. The New Atheists thrive on the impression that religion and reason are antithetical; we should never give them that ground. We need to demonstrate to the undecided that reason is on religion's side.

We should also realize that, in many things, the aggressive atheists are on our side. We, the reasonable Christians who value freedom and stand up for the oppressed, should be their natural allies. They see the rabid fundamentalism that infects so much of the world with endless violence, and they deplore it. We deplore it, too. They see the poor oppressed by the rich, and they demand justice. We demand justice, too.

In many areas, our fight is not against the atheists, but against the mistaken perceptions of Christianity they promote. The evangelical atheists assume that religion must inevitably breed mindless fanaticism. Countering that image means not just answering the atheists' arguments against God, but also correcting their false impressions of religion.

People who are most attracted to the New Atheism are likely to be people who think of themselves as good and reasonable. They genuinely care about people as human beings. When they see suffering, they want to help. If they think religion is the cause of the suffering, they turn against religion. And, after all, if they see Christians beating up Muslims, Muslims beating up Hindus, Hindus beating up Christians—well, what are they supposed to think? If they don't know anything about our religion, then that's what they think our religion is about.

But whose fault is it if they don't know anything about our religion? True, they haven't bothered to find out about it. But it's just as true that we too often haven't bothered to tell anyone about it.

Is the New Atheism a danger to the Church? Yes, it is. By substituting secularity with secularism—neutrality toward religion with hostility toward religion—New Atheists can make the world difficult for Christians to live in.

But the real danger is not from the fanatical atheists themselves, but from our own indifference. If we don't make the effort to reach out to the people who are most ambitious, who are most intelligent, who care most about the shape of the world around them, then we deserve the punishment in Christ's parable of the worthless servant (Matthew 25:14-30). What little we have should be taken away and given to someone who will make something of it.

We need to confront the New Atheism on its own turf, candidly admitting where we agree with the atheists, and explaining our differences patiently and reasonably. But beyond the argument of words, there is another, even better argument.

The Christian life has always been the most compelling argument for Christianity. Living like a Christian—loving our enemies and letting everyone see our joy in the truth—is the most convincing way of spreading the Gospel. When we face the New Atheists, we should look like Christians: not shouting, angry fanatics, but charitable, intelligent people who are willing to listen as well as to make pronouncements.

We have the power to guide what the people around us think about religion. What we say is important, but what we do is even more important. Even when right reason doesn't prevail, living the Christian life will win the argument.

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