

CATHOLICISM AND HEAVEN'S GATE

The tragedy of the Heaven's Gate cult, which resulted in the loss of 39 lives, was unfairly compared by some in the media to Catholicism. Here are a few examples.

On Nightline, pictures of the Vatican were shown while introducing the subject of religious cults. On talk radio, Ron Kuby, who assisted the late William Kunstler, said there was no difference between believing that a space ship was coming to save the cult members and a belief in the Immaculate Conception. And Harvard lawyer Alan Dershowitz contrasted the cult's beliefs with a belief in angels.

It is tempting to see anti-Catholicism at work here, but in fairness, what it shows is the consequence of believing in nothing. Agnostics and atheists have a hard time understanding anything that is not scientifically verifiable and thus tend to relegate to the bin of superstition any belief in a transcendent universe. That their own beliefs are substantively hollow is not something they are willing to entertain.

At bottom, those who like to make these comparisons show their inability to distinguish between New Ageism and Christianity. But since making critical distinctions is one mark of a true intellectual, it also tells us something about their status.

SATURDAY NIGHT LIVE STRIKES

AGAIN

Once again, Saturday Night Live has crossed the line. It was one thing to do a skit parodying the Crusades entitled, "The Nude Crusades," quite another to mock the Eucharist. In the March 15 edition, Jesus is made the butt of humor when a woman nude crusader remarks, "This is my body, now show me yours."

Perhaps our members can explain to Mr. Lorne Michaels, the executive producer of the show, the difference between a parody that is in fair taste and comments like the one cited. Write to him at Saturday Night Live, 30 Rockefeller Plaza, Room 1719, New York, New York 10112.

LEAGUE SIGNS OPEN LETTER TO AL GORE

The Catholic League, along with several other organizations and distinguished individuals, signed an open letter to Vice President Al Gore regarding a trip he made to China during Holy Week. Published in the Washington Times on Easter Sunday, the letter implored the vice president to make an issue of human rights and religious persecution when visiting with Chinese leaders. Christians, and Catholics in particular, have been brutalized in recent years by the Chinese government. Here is the text of the letter:

March 27, 1997

Dear Vice President Gore:

On March 4, as you were preparing for your trip to China,

agents from the Shanghai Public Security Bureau invaded and ransacked the apartment of Bishop Fan Zhengliang, S.J., the Coadjutor Roman Catholic Bishop of Shanghai. Bishop Fan was targeted because the Chinese government has banned all religious activity and expression outside the system of state controlled "churches" it has established as part of its campaign against religion. According to the Cardinal Kung Foundation in Stamford, Connecticut, the police seized Bishop Fan's bibles, missals, catechism, the Code of Canon law, and other religious items and writings. The agents also confiscated all of the church's cash assets in Bishop Fan's possession.

This act of terrorism was plainly timed to intimidate Catholics and other Christians in the period leading up to Holy Week and Easter. Chinese authorities engaged in a similar crackdown last December, targeting Catholics and Protestants in a campaign designed to prevent any observance of Christmas. If history is any guide, the raid on Bishop Fan will be revealed to be part of a larger campaign of terror and religious oppression throughout China.

The contempt of the Chinese government for basic human rights has been on display for years. Sadly, the campaign against men and women of faith has been intensifying rather than diminishing, even as our government has promoted increasing economic engagement with China. Our own State Department and human rights groups like the Puebla Institute, have documented the chilling details of this campaign. Priests have been arrested for saying mass. Evangelical "house church" services have been disrupted and buildings holding such services have been bulldozed. Arrests, interrogations, and internment of Christians in "re-education" programs have been common. Anti-religious slogans have been painted by police officials in China's town squares. In January 1996, as reported by the State Department, an annual government religious affairs conference invoked a "harder line" against any religious

activity that is not organized and directed by communist "party loyalists."

Repression of religious belief and practice has extended to China's 17 million Muslims and to Buddhists in Zhejiang Hubei provinces and in Tibet. In Zhejiang alone, some 17,900 shrines and churches were "rectified," a government euphemism which connotes, destruction, registration with the government as a controlled church, or transfer to another group. Only last September, Premier Li Peng, who you toasted on your visit to China in commemoration of the new commercial arrangements between our nations, said that Chinese government departments must "step up the control of religious affairs" and that religion "should serve the aims of socialism."

It is in this atmosphere that the Easter Week crackdown has proceeded. It is in this atmosphere that you are visiting China. Your trip has been hailed by powerful U.S. business interests who lustfully eye the potentially vast Chinese market. Your presence in China was exploited for good publicity by the cruel communist tyrants who are responsible for the regimes war against religion. Yet you apparently did and said little in the cause of it's victims. So we must respectfully ask:

- Has the Clinton-Gore administration directed our U.S. Embassy in Beijing to put human rights issues at the top of our concerns in relations between our two countries?
- Did you seriously raise these issues of religious persecution at any time during your meetings with Premier Li Peng or other hosts for your trip? If so, what was their response? What, if any, commitments did you receive?
- In view of your role as the administration's "point man" on China issues, have you taken any other steps to fulfill the pledge made in the 1992 Clinton-Gore campaign to hold China to account for it's abysmal human rights record?

- During your visit to China, did you meet with any Chinese dissidents? We call to mind the fact that such meetings were a key component of U.S. policy vis-à-vis the Soviet Union during the Cold War, and that they served invaluable purposes in advancing the cause of human rights behind the Iron Curtain.
- Ambassador James Sasser said, in January 1996, that he was unaware of the Evangelical “house church” movement in its persecution in China. Has he now been thoroughly briefed and is he prepared to assert the strong protest of the United States in the event that those involved in this movement continue to be harassed and punished?
- Will the Clinton-Gore administration publish interim reports regarding China’s progress on human rights in advance of the upcoming exchange of visits between Chairman Jiang Zemin and President Clinton?

Mr. Vice President there is no question that U.S.- China policy stands at a critical crossroads. Our nation is being tested on its commitment to basic principles in the pursuit of justice and human rights in the face of temptation to sacrifice these principles in pursuit of profits. History has chosen President Clinton and you to represent this nation at that crossroads.

We pray that you will have the courage to stand with the victims of oppression in China and show the world that America still believes in “liberty and justice for all.”

GORE'S PRESS SECRETARY SLAMS CRITICS

Ginny Terzano, press secretary to vice president Al Gore, described all the individuals and organizations that signed the letter of protest to Mr. Gore as "right wing extremists interested in attacking the vice president." She did this on a Baltimore radio program.

The Catholic League signed a letter written by Gary Bauer of the Family Research Council that branded this attack as ad hominem. Bauer has asked that all those who have responded to the vice president be given an opportunity to meet with him.

In his own letter to the vice president, William Donohue wrote that "apparently you must think that the New York Times, which has also criticized your silence, is part of a right wing extremist movement. That, sir, is bizarre. Indeed, it suggests a posture that is at once both insular and defensive."

MASSACHUSETTS WORKER WINS

Kathleen Pielech and Patricia Reed, two workers whom the league defended when they were fired for not going to work on Christmas Day, have notified us that the law which would forever bar this practice from happening again was made retroactive, thus giving them the desired protection. The league had filed an amicus brief on their behalf.

However, Pielech isn't satisfied and will now seek even further justice under the new law by taking her employer to task for what happened.

AmFAR APOLOGIZES

In the April Catalyst, we published a story regarding the decision by AmFar (American Foundation for AIDS Research) to withdraw an ad that the Catholic League, and others, had protested. The ad in question was, "Prayer won't cure AIDS – Research will."

In a letter to Dr. Donohue, Jerome J. Radwin, the executive director and chief executive officer of AmFar, extended "his sincere apologies on behalf of the Foundation for any offense this campaign may have caused." He also said that the original ad read, "Prayer alone won't cure AIDS – Research will." Someone changed the ad and that is why it was pulled.

ANTI-CATHOLICISM IN PRO-ABORTION MOVIES

The International Women's Film and Video Festival is promoting two pro-abortion movies that have a strong anti-Catholic element to them. "The Fragile Promise of Choice: Abortion in the U.S. Today" and "From Danger to Dignity" both brand Catholic pro-lifers as deranged persons out to destroy liberty. Just as bad is the tact that those who are promoting the films are making.

One such example occurred in March in Huntington, Long Island. Victor Skolnick of the Cinema Arts Centre in Huntington wrote the following in his organization's newsletter: "These films,

among other things, are about the blatant attempt by a well-financed fanatic Christian Right minority and the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church under the guidance of the Pope in Rome to dictate the rights of American women.”

Chuck Mansfield, president of the league’s Long Island chapter, shot back: “Your rather tired tantrum [about the above remark], not to mention the overall tone and quality of your writing, bespeaks your unmistakable animus toward the Catholic Church. Indeed your language ... is inflammatory and bigoted.”

Mansfield also said that “Given your embrace of separation of church and state, I wonder how you and the other members of the Centre’s editorial board justify your use of government funds to promote propaganda against the Catholic Church.” Mansfield was referring to the funding that the Centre receives from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Suffolk County Office of Cultural Affairs.

CATHOLIC COLLEGE AVOIDS LEAGUE ACTION

An art exhibit at a west coast Catholic college almost triggered a strong response from the Catholic League. But we are happy to report that our intervention led to a satisfactory conclusion. Because the incident was handled responsibly by the president of the college, we have no interest in disclosing the name of the school. However, readers should know what happened.

The league learned that an art exhibit showed a rendition of the Virgin Mary as a large tattooed Barbie doll giving birth

to an Elvis doll. The art, which covered almost an entire wall, had a kneeler in front of it that activated the songs, "Like a Virgin" and "Material Girl." The artist claimed that his work was a parody of the pop star Madonna. It was on display in March and April.

A press story quoted the president as saying that the display is "not what I'd call good or devotional art, but I don't know that we would tear it of the walls." At that, William Donohue called the school and asked for verification. Nothing he said was disputed, however the person to whom he spoke expressed grave concern for what the league might do. Donohue told this person she had 20 minutes to have the president call him before he went to the press.

Shortly thereafter, a school official called Donohue asking what he wanted. Donohue said that if he didn't hear from the president in 15 minutes, he was going to the press denouncing the school's irresponsibility. He pledged to contact hundreds of media outlets advertising the school's position. Worried, the woman quickly got the message to the president and he called Donohue immediately.

The president stated that the display was not a rendition of the Virgin Mary. He said it was the artist's way of showing how materialistic the pop singer was in comparison to Our Blessed Lady. Donohue then asked if it was "empirically obvious" to everyone that the Barbie doll was not Mary. The president was somewhat less than convincing at this point, and that is why Donohue insisted that a sign be placed alongside the display indicating that this was not a representation of the Virgin Mary. The president agreed to this demand.

In the course of the discussion, Donohue told the president that when there is a conflict between respect for academic freedom and respect for the heritage of Catholicism, the value that should be paramount in the mind of Catholic college officials should clearly be the latter. After all, Catholic

colleges are not obliged to play host to Catholic-bashing.

The league is pleased with the outcome. But it finds it exasperating to have to instruct Catholic college officials on how to do their job.

STUDENTS FROM QUEENS COLLEGE BASH JESUS

Students from Queens College, in a student newspaper called QC QUAD, have taken to bashing Jesus. In a “humorous” column, “Dear Jesus: Real Advice from the Son of God,” sexually explicit questions are put to “Jesus” and his reply is printed.

The league has protested this abuse of Catholic taxpayer money (Queens is a New York City institution) and has asked for an end to this column and an apology to Christians and the college community, in general. “To print a column that mocks Christianity the day after Easter,” the league commented to the newspaper, “smacks of pettiness and bigotry.” If the column continues, the league will take its case to the media.

NEW YORK HIGH SCHOOL PULLS ART EXHIBIT

La Guardia High School of Music, Art and the Performing Arts pulled an obscene art exhibit just in time to avoid the

league's wrath. Located on the upper west side in Manhattan, the school withdrew four objectionable art displays after word had gotten out that some Catholics might not appreciate the exhibit.

The most obscene piece showed a poster on a refrigerator door with a picture of the Sacred Heart of Jesus surrounded with vulgar statements. It also showed a man offering a penis to Jesus. Another piece of "art" showed a Catholic schoolgirl in a skirt with her legs spread; it was also dotted with sexual comments.

The league was prepared to take its case to the media with this issue, but the curator, principal and superintendent had already decided to pull the pieces from the exhibit after some parents and students had already seen it.

It should be known that several parents defended the "art." Indeed, the student responsible for the withdrawn pieces admitted that his work was "meant to offend." Many of the students at the school supported him and were far more concerned about offending him than they were in insulting Catholics. In fact, they said that their only real concern was having the display "censored."

Had it not been for some Catholic laborers who work at the school, this issue may never have come to light.