

# THE COMMONWEAL CONFERENCE

By Cynthia Jessup

Are the media anti-religious? Do the media engage in Catholic bashing, Muslim stereotyping, the mockery or dismissal of traditional morality? If so, who is responsible and what can be done about it?

The possible responses to these questions and the issues that surround them were discussed at the last of three symposiums on Media and Religion sponsored by *Commonweal* magazine. The first two were held at Loyola University in Chicago and Georgetown University in Washington, D. C. This third and final one was held at Fordham University School of Law in New York City on October 25.

Peter Steinfels, senior religion correspondent of the *New York Times*, was the keynote speaker. Judith H. Banki of the Rabbi Tannenbaum Foundation was the moderator for the panel discussion, which included William F. Baker, CEO of WNET TV, Randall Balmer, Professor of Religion at Columbia University, John Leo of *U.S. News & World Report*, and Mary Alice Williams, former religion correspondent for NBC and CNN.

The symposium was aptly titled "War of the World Views? Religion and the Media." I say 'aptly' because it became clear during the opening speech and particularly during the panel discussion that there were two worldviews prompting opinions. These viewpoints, while not necessarily at war, were in profound disagreement.

In general, the two views could be sketched out as one that took religion seriously, and one that did not. The first understood religion to be a major force – morally, rationally, and politically – among the American people. The second seemed to see it as a second rate issue, one that had to be dealt with but wasn't quite the central concern for truly rational

people. As John Leo put it, the elite press corps saw religion as a hangover from the Middle Ages that must be indulged. This attitude, he noted, was fundamentally derived from the Enlightenment. Religious believers were relegated to the sidelines as irrational and overreactive. For example, Mr. Steinfels made the observation that “religion and media is a hot topic these days – surrounded by hypersensitivity and paranoia.”

The primary opinion of the modernist camp was that anti-religion bias and stereotyping was due to ignorance. Doubtless these stereotypes do, in many cases, spring from ignorance. As Father Richard John Neuhaus, editor of *First Things*, noted in the October issue, most national media reporters live in areas where secular life is the norm and where they aren't likely to have the chance to observe a religious tradition or come to know it in a sympathetic setting. Hence this religious ignorance often blossoms into malicious reporting and/or anti-religion coverage when it confronts a stance that is profoundly opposed to their secular worldview. Ms. Ranki commented on the extreme likelihood for people's convictions to affect their writing while they themselves are unconscious of it. The result is that what should be an ordinary news story becomes an anti-religious piece plugging a secularist worldview – sometimes blatantly but more often in a subtle manner, by making the opposing tradition, generally symbolized by the Catholic Church and the papacy, appear out-of-step, irrational, and harmful to the greater good. Mr. Steinfels responded to this kind of reporting in his speech by labeling it a sort of misperception on the part of the audience. Religious readers, after seeing an editorial in which definite anti-Catholic or liberal opinions are expressed, go on to read the news articles and expect it to carry the same ideological slant. This is inappropriate, he said, because while editorials are meant to express an opinion, reporting is meant to be objective and factual, and readers should make that distinction.

It was also said that reporting on religion suffered from a dearth of reporters educated about the subject that they write about. Time and space constraints were cited as well. All these problems, it was maintained, make it difficult to deal with religion in an appropriate manner, but were ostensibly not based on genuine malice or enmity towards religious people or institutions. Yet, as Ms. Williams noted, reporting for most subjects covered regularly in the news is done by reporters who hold degrees in a pertinent subject area. Political reporters have degrees in political science; medical issues are covered by medical doctors. Why religion isn't covered by religiously devout and informed people was never explained. Perhaps it is because those in the news are so biased in their ignorance that they consider religion too trivial or too subjective to merit an informed perspective.

Regarding the constraints of every media effort, the papers and television media regularly deal with subject matter that requires greater amounts of time and background than the average news item. The immediate example is science. In this case, they generally have an entire section, or segment of a broadcast, that deals only with that issue, and it is written by experts in the field. Why religion should be accorded different treatment, particularly when many Americans classify themselves as "religiously conservative," went without adequate explanation.