

THE IRRELIGIOUS LEFT

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The fact that the term Irreligious Left sounds strange, but Religious Right does not, is a function of media bias. No one uses the former term while the latter is part of every pundit's vocabulary. Yet in reality there is more reason to use the former than the latter. A recent Gallup poll on anti-Catholicism bears this out quite well.

When Rev. Jerry Falwell founded the Moral Majority in 1979, it was his goal to provide a political wake-up call to evangelical and fundamentalist Protestants. Ten years later, with the backing of Rev. Pat Robertson, Ralph Reed started the Christian Coalition, a group that piggy-backed on Falwell's idea by launching a grass-roots movement in communities throughout the nation. The Moral Majority is now dead and the Christian Coalition is in the recovery room, but no matter, both organizations succeeded in galvanizing their allies in a way that no one denies.

The rap on both groups has been that they are the Religious Right, a group of mean-spirited intolerant persons who are often seen as anti-Catholic.

The recent flap dealing with Bob Jones University and the House Chaplain issue offered more reasons to brand these Protestants as bigots.

I have been quoted, quite accurately, as saying that there is a problem with anti-Catholicism in this camp and that attempts to pretend it doesn't exist is dishonest as well as injurious. But it is also true that I have never doubted for one moment that the biggest problem with anti-Catholicism comes not from the Religious Right, but from those who believe in nothing. Now the Gallup organization has offered data that supports this observation.

In a poll conducted March 17-19, it was shown that 27% of Americans say they have a negative perception of the Catholic religion. After looking at the data, Gallup expert Frank Newport observed that “although about one-quarter of Americans have an unfavorable opinion of the Catholic religion, there is little evidence that supports the hypothesis that this anti-Catholicism is disproportionately located among conservative Protestants.” He concludes that “those who are most personally irreligious are most negative towards Catholics.”

The following data are illuminating:

Among those who say that religion is not very important in their daily life, 44% have an unfavorable view of Catholics.

Among those who are not members of church or synagogue, 39% have an unfavorable view of American Catholics.

Among those who never attend church, 54% have an unfavorable view of Catholics.

Among those who think that religion is largely old-fashioned and out of date, 45% say they have an unfavorable opinion of Catholics' religion.

As a sociologist who has examined similar data in the past, I am convinced that there are at least two distinct groups within this “unchurched” segment of the population: the apathetic and the angry.

The apathetic group consists mostly of non-joiners. These are men and women who never attend civic functions, never serve on school boards, never volunteer for anything, and seldom, if ever, go to church or to the voting booth. They *might* attend a block party, but if they do, they will do nothing to help.

While some may say they are harmless, Tocqueville saw them as a problem. They were a problem for a democracy because they allowed the state to do the work that should ideally be done

in local communities by voluntary organizations. But whatever one might say about them, they are not the ones who don't like Catholics. That award goes to the angry.

Unlike the apathetic, the angry often get involved in activist associations. They do so either to satisfy their own narcissistic appetites or to wreck havoc with the status quo; they are not given to altruism, though they speak endlessly about it.

These well-to-do people direct their anger at the social order, America, Western Civilization and nature. Most of all, they are angry at God. They constitute a disproportionate segment of the cultural elite, working in publishing, higher education, Hollywood, non-profit organizations and the like.

This slice of the "unchurched" population fancy themselves as tolerant, but they are anything but. Indeed, they are among the most intolerant people on earth, venting much of their anger at Catholicism. It is they who are the Irreligious Left.

So while some in the evangelical and fundamentalist ranks may prove to be a disagreeable lot for Catholics, they are not a dangerous gang that looks at the Church as an institution to be conquered. That prize goes to the Irreligious Left, a miserable bunch if there ever was one.