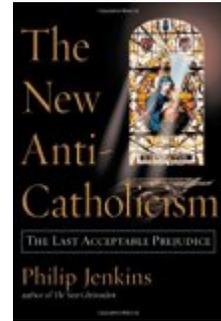


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Philip Jenkins. *The New Anti-Catholicism: The Last Acceptable Prejudice*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003. v + 258 pp. \$27.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-515480-1.

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Something New under the Sun?

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Anti-Catholicism has had a storied career in colonial America and the United States. It arrived with the Puritans, created turmoil in the colony of Maryland, and eventually helped stir up animosity among revolutionaries against the Quebec Act. Though it lay dormant for a number of years following the Revolutionary War, anti-Catholicism reappeared again in the 1830s as the binding element in a virulent and often violent nativism aimed primarily at Irish immigrants. Nativism seemed to peak in the 1850s, but reappeared in the late-nineteenth century. On into the 1900s anti-Catholicism proved an irrepressible part of the American psychological and political landscape. Yet in the 1940s and 1950s there was also another side to the story. Hollywood films portrayed Catholics and their clergy in a good light; television viewers of many faiths tuned in to watch Bishop Fulton Sheen's weekly program; and the descendants of Catholic immigrants assimilated into mainstream America. Perhaps most importantly, in spite of public questions about whether Kennedy could be a loyal American and a good Catholic at the same time, in 1960 he won the presidency.

According to Philip Jenkins, in the 1960s anti-Catholicism took on new adherents and characteristics substantially different from traditional American anti-Catholicism. So what makes current anti-Catholic sentiment "new," and to whom is such sentiment "acceptable" in ways that other forms of bigotry are not? The answer to both questions, says Jenkins, is to be found

on the left side of the political and religious spectrum. Since the Catholic Church opposes much of the secular and liberal worldview, its opponents have decided that it does not deserve equal protection as a religion, and therefore can be fought by any means necessary. While it is true that all prejudices are acceptable to those who propagate them, what is unique about the "new" anti-Catholicism, according to Jenkins, is twofold. First, it counts self-identified Catholics among its adherents. Second, the same people who express or approve of anti-Catholic sentiment loudly eschew other prejudices. Jenkins is not so much concerned with the nature of anti-Catholicism as he is with why these Americans, who condemn anti-Semitism, homophobia, and racism, tolerate anti-Catholicism.

The hallmark of American anti-Catholicism, argues Jenkins, has been "its infinite adaptability," allowing for a different rhetoric for different times (p. 45). He correctly points out that whereas anti-Catholicism traditionally has lived on the right wing of the political spectrum and been highly nativist, its newer counterpart can be found on the left among secularists and liberals. In the past, anti-Catholics "loathed the Roman Catholic Church" for what they saw as its "betrayals of Christian and biblical truths," and nativists warned of papal conspiracies to undermine the American republic. Such "an explicitly religious critique," writes Jenkins, "is of little interest to modern secular liberals" (p. 20). Instead, the new anti-Catholics are concerned with abortion and sexual issues.

Jenkins also examines the gay rights movement.

While the Catholic position on homosexuality for the most part has remained unchanged over two millennia, Jenkins contends that the social acceptance of gay behavior, buoyed by the entertainment media, has reinforced the argument that “the Church Kills Gays” (p. 93). Jenkins admits that homosexuality among priests is a “real issue,” but criticizes the prevalent stereotype of a psychosexually stunted or all-gay priesthood as “roughly on a par with images of Jewish moneylenders, or blacks eating watermelons” (p. 110). Jenkins is especially critical of media treatment of attacks on Catholic churches by gay activists who have, for example, committed vandalism, noisily disrupted Masses, and marched naked or simulated oral sex while dressed as nuns in front of churchgoers. Again, Jenkins’s point is not that such questionable activities occur, but that they are merely dubbed “protests” by those who otherwise express horror at incidents like cross-burnings and attacks on synagogues.

The entertainment media comes under a blistering attack from Jenkins. One of the newest things about the “new” anti-Catholicism, writes Jenkins, is the number of “anti-Catholic themes ... present in popular culture and popular media” (p. 113). Moreover, anti-Catholic rhetoric “that had largely been excluded from respectable discourse” is now accepted by “the social mainstream,” thanks to the innumerable anti-Catholic movies, shows, and books that have been produced since the 1970s (p. 156). Now, Jenkins argues, it seems “natural to present any tale of religious deceit in a Catholic context” (p. 173).

As to the very real case of “religious deceit” involving priestly sex abuse, Jenkins calls the reaction to it “disproportionate” (p. 134). He argues that journalists have exaggerated figures of abuse, noting that the numbers of Catholic clergy engaged in such things are proportionately no higher than that of other clergy or persons who work closely with children. In consequence of the anti-Catholic milieu created in the 1970s, stories about Catholic abuse are simply easier to write because reporters know all the hot-button questions to ask regarding celibacy, secrecy, and episcopal abuse of power. Jenkins contends that the media reaction to the scandals was little more than “a gross efflorescence of anti-Catholic rhetoric” (p. 134).

Jenkins’s book raises a few important questions for which it does not provide answers, but perhaps should have. For example, to get to the root of anti-Catholicism one must ask if its proponents (mainly liberals, according to Jenkins) oppose only the Catholic Church, or do they oppose traditional Christian morality, something

which the Catholic Church still teaches publicly? If the latter, then is not anti-Christian (or, more precisely, morally relativistic) a more appropriate label for those who, as Jenkins admits, attack the Catholic Church primarily because it is the most organized, visible, and strongest opponent of their views? Do not evangelical Protestants get the same treatment in the media and among secularists and liberals that the Catholic Church receives, in terms of being portrayed in gross stereotypes (snake handlers, Bible-thumpers with seedy private lives, and the ever-sweaty preacher’s brow)? The old anti-Catholicism certainly was not anti-Christian in the larger sense, but is not the “new” anti-Catholicism just part of the larger liberal/secularist/modernist worldview, which can be traced back to the nineteenth century and even beyond, that embraces moral relativism and disbelieves in the existence of objective truth? The truly unique feature of the “new” anti-Catholicism seems only to be that some of its adherents identify themselves as Catholics.

The label of “new” is also questionable when used by Jenkins to refer to anti-Catholic movies, television shows, and news stories. These are but a rebirth of the tales of licentious friars and vicious nuns that so titillated the reading public in the nineteenth century, beginning with the “Maria Monk” tale in the 1830s.[1] This “pornography of the Puritan,” as Richard Hofstadter called it, has long been a part of American popular culture, although its prevalence in acceptable media outlets certainly is a change from the Bing Crosby films of yore.[2] For the most part, the only thing new about such tales is that they appear not in the pages of books or pamphlets but on television and at the cinema. True, the propagators are new, as Jenkins asserts, but neither the plotlines nor the subject matter are.

Overall, *The New Anti-Catholicism* is an insightful, highly readable, and disturbing expose of anti-Catholicism in contemporary America. While it might leave the reader with questions about the “new”-ness of the current anti-Catholicism and how that anti-Catholicism fits into the opinion held by many secularists and liberals of Christianity in general, perhaps that is not such a bad thing.

Notes

[1]. Maria Monk, *Awful Disclosures of Maria Monk ... in the Hotel Dieu Nunnery at Montreal* (New York: Howe and Bates, 1836).

[2]. Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* (New York, 1964), p. 21.

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