The New Anti-Catholicism
Also by Philip Jenkins

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Preface

As always, my main debt of gratitude in writing this book is to my wife, Liz Jenkins. I would also like to thank my friend Marian Ronan for her good counsel—though I am sure she will disagree with much of what follows!

I should say a word about my personal stance toward the issues discussed in this book. Over the past decade, I have worked on a number of controversial topics involving Catholicism, particularly on the theme of child abuse by clergy. During the wave of national concern about that issue during 2002, I argued that the reality of the “pedophile priest” issue was quite different from what was being presented by the mass media, and that the number of priests involved in this behavior was significantly smaller than was commonly assumed. In the context of the time, my attitude was seen by some as a defense of the Church, and not surprisingly it involved me in some lively debates. As a result, I have often been asked about my personal relationship to Catholicism. I was a member of the Roman Catholic Church for many years, but I left, without any particular rancor, and since the late 1980s, I have been a member of the Episcopal Church. (Within that tradition, I define myself as a small-c catholic, a distinction that often puzzles large-C Roman Catholics.) I have never been a member of the clergy in any church, nor a seminarian, nor was I associated with any religious order. I have no vested interest in defending the Roman Catholic Church, nor can I fairly be described as an uncritical defender of Catholic positions.
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Depressing thought: every conformist group has its own equivalent of the scourge of anti-Semitism, a scourge inflicted on any minority it dare not understand for fear of having to think things through. Your “Jew” (your “slacker,” your spoilsport, your inconvenient non-booster) is whoever distracts you from your television set. Or who asks “why” instead of “how.” Catholic-baiting is the anti-Semitism of the liberals.

— Peter Viereck

Catholics and Catholicism are at the receiving end of a great deal of startling vituperation in contemporary America, although generally, those responsible never think of themselves as bigots. Examples are far too easy to find. Recently, the notionally secular New Republic published an article on the wartime role of the papacy, in which Pope Pius XII was charged with directly serving the Antichrist. Somewhat less apocalyptically, writing in The Nation, dramatist Tony Kushner dismissed Pope John Paul II as a “homicidal liar” who “endorses murder.” Catholic bishops, meanwhile, are, to Kushner, “mitred, chasubled and cope Pilates.” Responding to a papal appeal about the need to revive civil discourse, Kushner wrote that he would first request the Pope not to “beat my
brains out with a pistol butt and leave me to die by the side of the road.” In 2002, the furor over child sexual abuse by Catholic clergy provoked a public outpouring of anti-Church and anti-Catholic vituperation on a scale not witnessed in this country since the 1920s. Reasonable and justified critiques of misconduct by particular Church authorities segued effortlessly into grotesque attacks on the Catholic Church as an institution, together with sweeping denunciations of Catholic faith and practice. Large sections of the media assumed that most Catholic clergy were by definition child molesters, who should be viewed as guilty until proven innocent.

Responding to such attacks draws forth still plainer examples of raw anti-Catholic sentiment. Not long ago, Sister Mary Explains It All, a televised version of Christopher Durang’s play, was attacked as grossly anti-Catholic. Whether or not the charge was fair, the response of the film’s director certainly seemed to fit that characterization, since he claimed that “any institution that backed the Inquisition, the Crusades and the Roman position on the Holocaust deserves to be the butt of a couple of jokes.” The accuracy or relevance of each of those historical references is open to massive debate, but the director was citing them as if they somehow represented the authentic face of Catholicism. Each term—Inquisition, Crusade, Holocaust—is powerfully evocative, so that a suggestion that any group might share guilt for these acts is very damning. A writer in Slate magazine effectively blamed Catholics themselves for any stigma they suffer: “If anti-Catholic bigotry exists in America, it might have something to do with the Catholic Church’s past conduct. Just this weekend, His Holiness John Paul II conceded as much when he finally got around to apologizing to the world for 2000 years of Catholic wickedness. He apologized for the forced conversions, for the murderous Crusades, and for the Inquisition.” The author compared the Pope to “hate-mongers” like Louis Farrakhan.

None of these remarks is terribly unusual in contemporary discussions of religion. What is striking about these comments is not any individual phrase or accusation, but the completely casual way in which these views are stated, as if any normal person should be expected to share these beliefs. Responding to criticisms of his attack on the Church, Kushner himself wrote, apparently seriously, “I can’t help feeling stung at being labeled anti-Catholic.” Complaints about anti-Catholicism are likely to provoke countercharges of oversensitivity, much as complaints about racism or anti-Semitism did in bygone generations. As Andrew Greeley writes, anti-Catholicism is so insidious “precisely because it is not acknowledged, not recognized, not explicitly and self-consciously rejected.” The attitudes are so ingrained as to be invisible.
Even more outrageous than verbal remarks have been protests and demonstrations directed against Catholic institutions. Two notorious examples involved protests in venerated churches. In 1989, several thousand protesters led by the AIDS activist group ACT UP demonstrated during a mass at New York’s St. Patrick’s Cathedral. A hundred and thirty protesters demonstrated in the church itself, stopping mass and forcing Cardinal John O’Connor to abandon his sermon. O’Connor was loudly denounced as a “bigot” and a “murderer.” Demonstrators fell down in the aisles to simulate death, while condoms were thrown. Among the slogans chanted by protesters were “You say, don’t fuck; we say, fuck you!” and “Stop killing us! Stop killing us! We’re not going to take it anymore!” Placards read “The Cardinal lies to his parishioners.” Most harrowing from a Catholic perspective, one protester grabbed a communion wafer—to a believer, literally the body of Christ—and threw it to the floor. One enthusiastic supporter of the demonstration boasted that the action “violated sacred space, transgressed sacred ritual and offended sensibilities.”

In 2000, a similar outbreak occurred in Montreal, when twenty ski-masked members of a Feminist Autonomous Collective interrupted a mass in the Catholic cathedral of Marie, Reine du Monde. They spray-painted on the church “Religion—A Trap for Fools,” sprayed atheist and anarchist graffiti on the altar, and tried unsuccessfully to overturn the tabernacle, which contains the sacred Host. Demonstrators stuck used sanitary napkins on pictures and walls, threw condoms around the sanctuary, and shouted pro-abortion slogans. They also destroyed or removed hundreds of hymnbooks or missals.

Quite as remarkable as the events themselves was the coverage they received in the media, and the general lack of outrage. One would have thought that the element of book burning in the Canadian incident should have aroused powerful memories of religious hatred in bygone eras. Yet remarkably few U.S. or even Canadian newspapers so much as reported this event. Both stories, moreover, have rather faded from popular memory in a way they would not have done if other religious or racial groups had been targeted. Imagine, for instance, that a group wishing to protest the actions of the state of Israel had occupied or desecrated an American synagogue, particularly during some time of special holiness such as Yom Kippur. The act would unquestionably have been described by the familiar label of “hate crime,” and the activists’ political motivation would not have saved them from widespread condemnation. Depending on the scale of the violence, the political content of the act might even push it into the category of terrorism. The synagogue attack
would be cited for years after as an example of the evils of religious hatred and bigotry, in marked contrast to the near oblivion that has be-fallen the anti-Catholic protests. This kind of analogy helps explain why Jewish organizations have been so notably sensitive to incidents like the St. Patrick’s affair, far more so than the secular media.

We can draw parallels with a 1996 incident in which employees of a Denver radio station stormed into a mosque, playing the national anthem on bugle and trumpet. Public outcry was enormous, and thou-sands of citizens gathered to protest the attack; the story gained media attention both nationally and globally. The radio station issued a groveling apology and agreed to provide “sensitivity training” for its personnel, as well as offering reparations to local Muslims. Yet this moronic prank was probably less traumatic than the cathedral attacks, since it did not include the same kind of highly targeted assaults on venerated objects as did the Catholic incidents. (While Muslims have no less sense of the sacred, they do not share Catholic sensibilities about the sanctity of consecrated places of worship.)

| The Thinking Man’s Anti-Semitism |

Almost as troubling as the sheer abundance of anti-Catholic rhetoric is the failure to acknowledge it as a serious social problem. In the media, Catholicism is regarded as a perfectly legitimate target, the butt of harsh satire in numerous films and television programs that attack Catholic opinions, doctrines, and individual leaders. Arguably, such depictions are legitimate expressions of free speech and stand within America’s long tradition of quite savage satire, but the same tolerance of abuse does not apply when other targets are involved. It would be interesting to take a satirical or comic treatment featuring, say, the Virgin Mary or Pope John Paul II and imagine the reaction if a similar gross disrespect was applied, say, to the image of Martin Luther King Jr or of Matthew Shepard, the gay college student murdered in Laramie, Wyoming, in 1998. What sometimes seems to be limitless social tolerance in modern America has strict limits where the Catholic Church is concerned.

Since the 1950s, changing cultural sensibilities have made it ever more difficult to recite once-familiar American stereotypes about the great majority of ethnic or religious groups, while issues of gender and sexual orientation are also treated with great sensitivity. At least in public discourse, a general sensitivity is required, so that a statement that could be regarded as misogynistic, anti-Semitic, or homophobic would haunt a speaker for years, and could conceivably destroy a public career. Yet there is one massive exception to this rule, namely, that it is still possible to
make quite remarkably hostile or vituperative public statements about one major religious tradition, namely, Roman Catholicism, and those comments will do no harm to the speaker’s reputation. No one expects that outrageous statements or acts should receive any significant response, that (for example) performances of Kushner’s *Angels in America* should be picketed.

Assessing the scale or seriousness of any kind of prejudice is extraordinarily difficult, but Peter Viereck described “Catholic-baiting” as “the anti-Semitism of the liberals,” a phrase that sometimes appears as “the thinking man’s anti-Semitism.” At first sight, this analogy seems unnecessarily provocative. It invites the obvious question of whether anti-Catholicism been responsible for the deaths of millions of innocent people in the same way that anti-Jewish prejudice undeniably has. The Nazis murdered millions of Catholics in Poland and elsewhere, but in the vast majority of cases, they acted on the grounds of their victims’ nationality or politics rather than their religion. And while Communist regimes in Europe and East Asia murdered and tortured millions of Catholic believers, the persecutions did not come close to the kind of near annihilation that Jews suffered in the Holocaust. Is the anti-Semitic analogy not hyperbolic and incendiary?

Obviously, I am drawing no comparison between modern American cultural phenomena and the exterminationist anti-Semitism of Europe in the 1930s and 1940s. Still, a quite proper analogy can be drawn between the history of anti-Semitism and anti-Catholicism within the United States itself. Let us compare like with like. In some periods, American anti-Semitism has been rampant, and even violent, but religious prejudice in the United States has been directed at least as often against Catholics as against Jews, and anti-Catholic vitriol has more frequently been central to party politics. Viewed against the broad context of American history, the intensity of anti-Jewish hatred in American life during the 1930s and 1940s looks anomalous, an odd departure from the customary cultural themes. Past and present, analogies between the two “antis” are closer than we might think. Yet while anti-Semitism is all but universally condemned, anti-Catholicism is widely tolerated.

### Anti-ism

In one crucial area, anti-Catholicism is different from other prejudices, and this difference is commonly used to justify the kinds of remarks and displays described. While a hostile comment about Jews or blacks is directed at a community, an attack on Catholicism is often targeted at an institution, and it is usually considered legitimate to attack an institu-
tion. Someone who speaks of “the evil Catholic Church” can defend this view as a comment on the leadership and policies of the institution without necessarily denouncing ordinary Catholic people. That phrase cannot immediately be cited as bigotry in tandem with a slur on “the evil Jewish community” or “America’s evil black population.” From this point of view, the proper parallel for an attack on the Catholic Church would be (say) with a denunciation of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Since this would not of itself constitute bigotry, neither should an attack on the Catholic Church. This distinction between institution and community also helps explain the relative lack of social reaction to anti-Catholic venom. As Andrew Greeley writes, “The reason that most Catholics are not concerned about anti-Catholicism is that they are not hurting.”

Yet this distinction between institution and people is a very weak defense. Unlike those other instances, the institution of the Church is fundamental to the Catholic religion, and it is disingenuous to pretend otherwise. The NAACP is simply not central to black cultural identity in the way that the Church defines Catholicism. The Pope may be the institutional head of a gigantic political and corporate entity, but for hundreds of millions of people, he is also a living symbol of their faith. Moreover, if the Catholic Church as an institution is so wicked, so homicidal, what does that say about the people who believe deeply in it, for whom it provides the vital organizing principle of their lives, the basis of their social identity? Anti-Church sentiment leads naturally to contempt for practicing or believing Catholics, whose faith must reflect emotional weakness, internal repression, or unnatural subservience to authority. The National Lampoon once featured a parody of multiple-choice exams, in which one question read “Only a very ___ person believes in Catholicism.” There were four possible answers, a through d, all of which offered the same word to fill in the gap: stupid.

At the outset, we need a reliable definition of what is meant by the term “anti-Catholic.” Obviously, not every statement attacking a Catholic doctrine or stance is ipso facto a form of bigotry. Not even the most extreme Catholic traditionalist believes that everything the institutional Church does is beyond debate, still less the acts and words of every individual Church leader. Traditionalists themselves are likely to have very hostile words for recent Church policies, and for particular bishops or cardinals. In Boston in 2002, the scandal over sexual abuse by clergy provoked savage criticism of the city’s Catholic leader, Cardinal Bernard F. Law, as conservatives and liberals vied with each other to show the greater zeal in demanding his resignation. Even when the Catholic Church
was much less liberal than it is today, Catholic writers freely acknowledged that throughout history, particular priests, bishops, and even popes had committed terrible blunders or outright crimes. Catholics have never claimed a privilege against self-criticism.

Of its nature, the Catholic Church is also more exposed to criticism because of the breadth of outlook that in other respects is one of its proudest boasts. Far more than most churches or denominations, Catholicism offers a comprehensive social vision, and claims the right to speak authoritatively on any and all issues affecting the human condition. In a more secular modern world, though, that ambitious position means potentially treading on a great many toes. The Catholic stance is a continuing affront to upholders of the powerful contemporary idea that religion is fine so long as it is held privately, on an individualistic basis.

Many people strenuously oppose the positions taken by the Catholic Church on social and political issues without needing to attack that religion as such or wishing to insult its theology. Abortion, contraception, genetic research, school vouchers, marriage annulments—all are issues on which the Church has positions that are unpopular with substantial sections of the American people. Some of these ideas also provoke strenuous dissent within the Catholic community itself, where a growing number of believers classify themselves as members of a loyal opposition. Within the Church, and passionately committed to its interests, there are Catholics who dissent from official teachings on such key issues as contraception, homosexuality, the ordination of women, and clerical celibacy. It is not anti-Catholic simply to assert that the Church’s position on a given issue is dead wrong, nor that Bishop X or Cardinal Y is a monster or a menace to the public good. Just because a given Catholic group is offended by a particular cause or policy stance does not automatically place that idea within the realm of bigotry. This was the position taken by William Donohue, president of the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights, who is quick to take umbrage at perceived slurs against the Church. Responding to the media coverage of the clergy abuse scandals, though, he wrote, “There’s nothing biased about hanging the dirty laundry of an institution out for the public to see. People who love the Church want to get rid of the problem, and the way to get rid of the problem is to be informed.” When confronted with a problem of this gravity, the most effective way to damage Catholic interests would be to withhold or suppress legitimate criticism. This would also be the position of the liberal reformist group Voice of the Faithful, formed in direct response to the abuse crisis in New England.

We also need to recognize that the charge of anti-Catholicism is as
open to misuse as any other accusation of bias or bigotry. To take a hypothetrical example, imagine a Catholic diocese that has been repeatedly affected by scandals involving sexual or financial fraud, and in which it is clear that a bishop has simply ignored the persistent problems around him. If the local news media were to expose the abuses and demand reform, it is conceivable that diocesan authorities would argue that their critics were anti-Catholic, and such an argument would have carried a great deal of weight in most periods prior to, say, the 1980s. The regularity with which Church authorities played this card in bygone days helps explain modern skepticism about the whole notion of anti-Catholicism.

So when does a statement or act plausibly make the transition from criticism to bigotry, to “anti-ism”? Once again, we can see a useful parallel in the concept of anti-Semitism. Nobody would complain if a news outlet accurately reported the criminal activities of an individual who was Jewish. On the other hand, most observers would complain bitterly if the media outlet in question proposed that this form of criminality was peculiarly characteristic of Jews or arose from features of Jewish religion or ethnicity. It would be still worse to report a given crime or misdeed alongside real or imaginary instances of Jewish misdeeds through the centuries, implying that “this is what Jews do, this is what they are like.” That would be frank anti-Semitism.

To take another Jewish example, criticisms of the state or government of Israel are not of themselves anti-Semitic, even if they allege wide-ranging crimes or misdeeds by that nation. Human infallibility is a concept unknown to Judaism, and even a Jewish nation can err badly, as can specific leaders. Many Jews are severely critical of Israeli politicians such as Ariel Sharon or Benjamin Netanyahu. Yet over the last few years, especially in Europe, criticisms of Israel have tended to develop into quite vicious anti-Semitic attacks, deploying the full range of traditional stereotypes. This is particularly true in visual displays, in which the Star of David is juxtaposed with swastikas or shown symbolically dominating the world. However justified anti-Israel criticisms may be on specific occasions, this rhetoric can serve as a highly sensitive detonator for anti-Semitism. Again, the core argument is that this is the sort of thing that Jews can be expected to do.

If we generalize these principles, we can say that is quite legitimate to attack an individual or an institution, even if these are religious in nature. It is a quite different matter to say that some essential features of that religion give rise to evil or abuse and that the evil cannot be prevented without fundamentally changing the beliefs or practices of the religion. It is not anti-Catholic to remark that Bishop A or Cardinal B is
dishonest or criminal. It is more questionable to describe these actions as characteristic of a large body of Catholics or to claim that the behavior arises from ideas and practices fundamental to Catholicism.

Perhaps some religious or political systems are so aberrant in their very nature that they do inevitably produce evil consequences. Most of us would happily concur with this view of Nazism, say, and would have no problem in accepting the overarching label “anti-Nazi.” But very few would argue overtly that a whole religion is evil in the same way. With few exceptions—such as a handful of notoriously violent cults—religions are usually held to be worthy of respect by outsiders. Condemning a whole religion is commonly, and reasonably, perceived as bigotry. This reluctance to stigmatize religious traditions was evident following the appalling terrorist attacks in the United States in September 2001, when political leaders, the mass media, and civil liberties groups allied to resist attacks on Islam. Any public remark suggesting that Islam was intrinsically connected with violence and terrorism was deemed racist, prejudiced, and unacceptable, while sporadic assaults on Muslim institutions met with widespread condemnation. As with anti-Semitism, public opinion was expected to reject any attempt to denounce a religion on the grounds of the misdeeds of some of its members. Commonly, this kind of bigotry is seen as a fundamental betrayal of American values.

This campaign in the name of tolerance is remarkable when set next to the blanket denunciations all too often visited upon Catholicism. Ironically, the September massacres resulted in some remarkable tirades not against the religion of Islam but against Catholicism, though the actual Catholic linkage to the attacks was nonexistent. In the New York Press, Michelangelo Signorile somehow used Islamist fanatic Osama bin Laden as a means of denouncing “the gay-bashing Pope.” John Paul, too, was “another omnipotent religious zealot, one who equally condemns us Western sinners and incites violence with his incendiary rhetoric. … Christian fundamentalist extraordinaire and a man who inspires thugs across the globe who commit hate crimes against homosexuals, a form of terrorism if ever there was one.” Signorile later included the Catholic cardinals among the religious right who constituted “the real American Taliban.” Writing in the San Francisco Examiner, Kimberly Blaker noted, “The irony is that the Islamic terrorists responsible for the September 11 fatalities are merely clones of America’s own Christian Right extremists, sheathed in a different religion.” She made it clear that she considered the Catholic Church the heart of the lunatic “religious right.” It is difficult to know how to characterize these views except in terms of rank anti-Catholicism.