
THE USE AND ABUSE

Kenneth L. Woodward

ANYONE who has covered the religion beat for as long as I have should be able to recognize its users and abusers. The abusers, of course, are easy to spot. In fact, a journalist can hardly avoid them. To turn the matter around, the Good News seldom makes news; even when an evidently good person attracts media attention, the result is often insipid. I'm sure, for example, that Mother Theresa of Calcutta is a more interesting person—a tougher nut, really—than her pious media image. In trying to write about such people a journalist comes to appreciate why Milton's Satan is so much more attractive than his God. Indeed, one comes to understand why western religion has hung on to Satan long after he has outlived his purely theological usefulness. The evil men do casts a long shadow, and we need an image for that shadow in which we find so much of ourselves revealed.

This brings us, briefly, to the abusers. I have time to mention only a very few, name-brand abusers out of a legion of worthy candidates. It often seems to me that the whole country today is a burned-over district with everyone peddling his or her revised standard version of reality. Television only makes matters worse by giving high and incessant visibility to some of the most tawdry of these preachers. The Federal Communications Commission did all of us a real disservice when it decided to deregulate public service broadcasting, thus allowing stations to sell that time to the highest bidder. The result is the electronic church which features several of the most prominent abusers of religion.

On the top of my personal list are those who take the hard and classic words of Scripture and gum them into self-help mush. I am thinking especially of the Reverend Robert Schuller, with his unctuous "Hour of Power" brought to you and me from a garish crystal cathedral. "Only in America," as Harry Golden used to say. Schuller, of course, is merely the latest of a long line of positive thinkers going back through Norman Vincent Peale who reduce Christianity to a handbook for achieving success and a pleasing personality.

Then there is Oral Roberts with his healing cloths and his vision of a 900-foot-tall Jesus. I have never trusted anyone who sews his initials on his shirt cuffs, but this insecure, self-promoting faith healer has put his full name on a university, a hospital, and a medical school. Roberts is a curious bird. He has erected a tower of prayer in Tulsa, Oklahoma, which, he says, keeps a

WATS line to God open 24 hours a day. With a little money to Brother Oral the gullible can have anything they want. Yet Oral himself trusts no one. He lives behind a guarded fence and monitors through TV cameras everyone who approaches his house.

Roberts, host of the PTL (Praise the Lord) Club, and other TV evangelists, is a charismatic Christian. Charismatics claim to have had a certain kind of religious experience—usually a special communication or approbation from God. This is fine with me so long as they don't insist that everyone else must have that experience too. If the charismatics are to be believed God is so busy healing cancer, shrinking hemorrhoids and supplying new kitchen appliances to those who pray for such things that he has no time to worry about other incidentals like sin and injustice.

There are those who call themselves "charismatic Catholics" (which grieves me a lot) and they meet periodically at my alma mater, Notre Dame. Once, not long ago, I sent someone down from our Chicago bureau to look at these people up close. As you know, the charismatics talk about the various gifts of the Holy Spirit a lot. This journalist came across someone with a bad case of acne who was actually doing quite well because (I swear to God) he discovered after becoming charismatic that he had the gift of pimples. I suppose the moral of the story is that you can turn anything into a blessing.

I readily concede that charismatic experiences can be beneficial to some people; perhaps having one would loosen me up. But I reject the assumption that they are normative. To such enthusiasts, I respond with Dr. Johnson, who replied to a story about a religious zealot of his own day: "If Mr. X has had an extraordinary experience, then I trust he will have the good sense to keep it to himself."

And then we have Brother Jerry Falwell of Old Time Gospel Hour and Moral Majority fame. Brother Jerry will sell you almost anything, including salvation. His concessions include Jesus lapel pins, American flag pins, Bibles, dial-a-prayer wheels, trips to the Holy Land, and laminated gold bricks. From all this he vacuums in more than \$1 million a week via television and computerized mailing lists.

What no one has quite figured out, however, is what Brother Jerry does with the money he gets. For example, Falwell will go over to Thailand and film himself among the Cambodian refugees and then appeal on their behalf

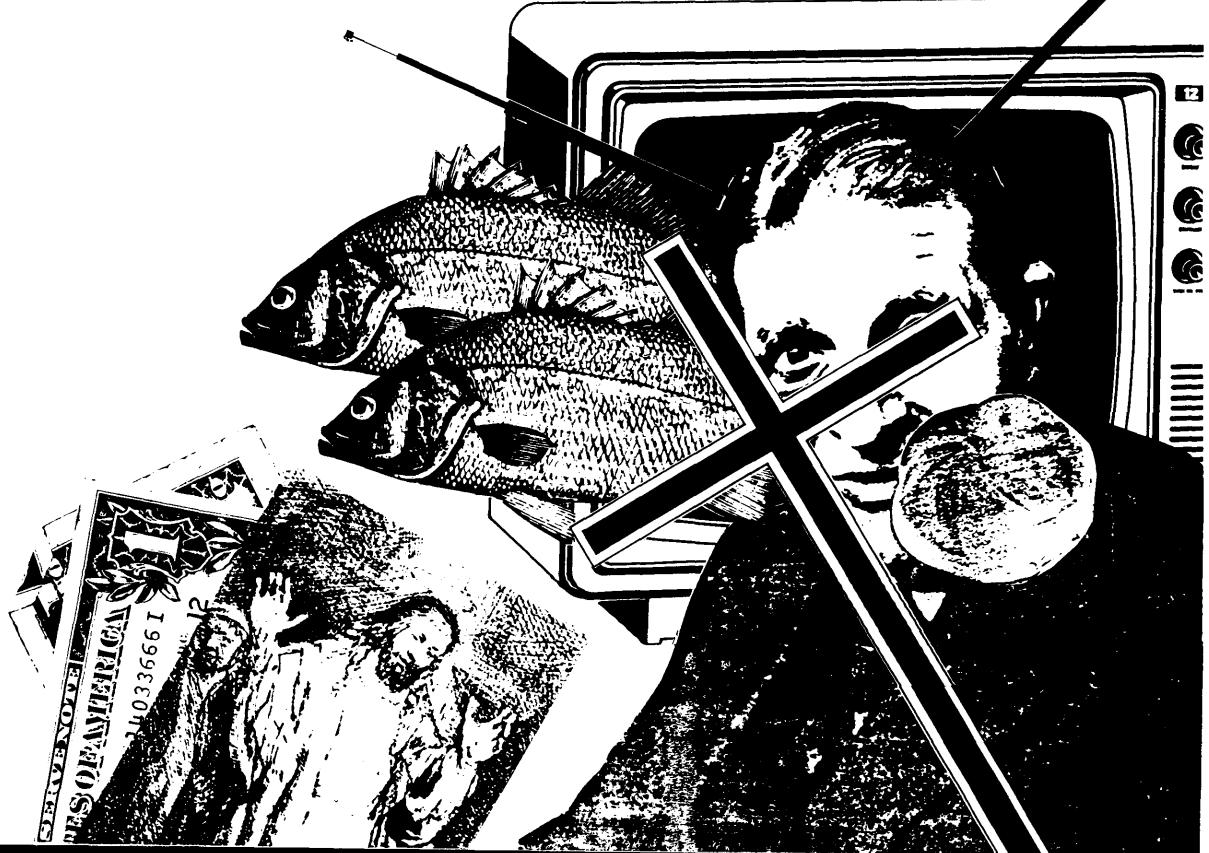
JSE OF RELIGION

for money. But very little of the money—reportedly less than one percent—goes to the refugees. You see, it seems that in the small print of his TV script and his letters of appeal, there is an out clause which allows him to spend the money on anything he wants.

Some of that money goes to his Liberty Baptist College, a guarded, barracks-like campus whose overseers make life so rigid that, by comparison, BYU looks like Greenwich Village. It is a paradox of fundamentalism that it abhors humanistic learning—which is to say education of any serious kind—yet its most ambitious preachers want nothing more than to build colleges after their own image and likeness. In other

words, what they want is respect and legitimacy.

But legitimate is one thing Brother Jerry is not. As Frances Fitzgerald documented in a long article on Falwell in *The New Yorker*, Falwell spends five dollars out of every seven he takes in on buying television time. To put this in perspective, one dollar out of every twenty is the norm for what not-for-profit organizations like Falwell's are expected to spend on fund raising. Any more than that is regarded as wasteful of the donor's gift. Falwell doesn't acknowledge his wastefulness, of course. But then he is not to be trusted. He lied when he told one of his "Wake Up America" rallies last year about a conversation regarding homosexuals that he had had



with then-President Jimmy Carter. The conversation never took place.

The Moral Majority is another matter. I am not as fearful of it as some people are. Partly, I think, because

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its influence has been vastly overestimated and partly because I too am adamantly opposed to abortion on demand and I don't much like the Equal Rights Amendment as it is presently written. If I had to choose between Falwell's vision of America and his TV talk show nemesis, Bob Guccione, the publisher of *Penthouse* who likes to photograph the centerfold nudes himself, I'd be hard put to make a choice. The two deserve each other; both are self-righteous. But America deserves neither.

There are a host of other abusers of religion I could mention. Certainly Dr. Sun Myung Moon, founder of the first new world religion to surface in the last hundred years or more, is one. And then there are the anonymous abusers. They include those religious publishers who claim to produce books only for the saved with titles like *The Christian Mother Goose* and manuals on oral sex for Christians only.

There are those who insist on peddling religion door-to-door as if religion could be sold like Avon products. Such an approach, I think, cheapens both the messenger and the message. And there are the teetotalers who are not content to abstain from alcohol for their own good reasons but who insist on reading their contemporary predilections back into the Bible, as if Jesus and his crowd drank only grape juice. I often wonder just how much such folk understand of Jesus's allusions to wine, vineyards and how he is the vine, his followers the branches.

These namebrand abusers, what do they have in common?

There is this: they all see themselves as self-made men whose success, nonetheless, is the work of God. It's a very American story line they have scripted for their lives.

Secondly, the religious response they all seek is essentially *cultic*. Brother Oral's prayer cloths, after all,

have been blessed by him. In the privacy of his church, Falwell damns Mormons, Adventists, Christian Scientists, and the like as members of cults, yet Brother Jerry himself is the grand interpreter of the Bible for his people, and the young people in his makeshift college, who are required to attend Brother Jerry's services, give him far more power over their lives than any pope could command.

Dr. Moon, of course, is creating a whole new church, a new family of man, really, and the only theological question open to his followers is whether Moon should be regarded as a latter-day John the Baptist or the waited new Savior himself.

As a journalist who covers religion, I am delighted to have these folks around. They are fun to write about. But they all share a third and very important characteristic: they give religion a bad name. They do this, moreover, at a time when, in my judgment, the culture, as I encounter it, is very open to religion.

II

I AM often asked whether there is a bias against religion in the secular media, particularly that which emanates from the canyons of mid-Manhattan. I try to answer the question this way. The major media in this country are part of an "Ovculture," which is easier to point to than to define. It is neither folk culture nor high culture but an inbetween, pervasive, entrepreneurial culture which absorbs and recasts both. It is not the culture of creators but of transmitters, the culture of those in the knowledge industries, the people who work in higher education, publishing, museums, films, and the broadcast media. It is not altogether a mass culture but rather, in Daniel Bell's phrase, it is a "cultural mass," numbering several million Americans who provide both the medium and to a large extent the market for cultural products.

It is, obviously, hard to draw precise boundaries around the Ovculture. But you come to know who is in and who is out.

Now this Ovculture is essentially secular in its assumptions, values, perceptions, and thought processes. It may see religion and major religious figures as interesting, colorful, and perhaps even important to certain constituencies but not as central or crucial to its concerns. The newsmagazine in its format is an apt paradigm of the Ovculture, in the way that it divides up the world according to departments. The chief focus of the newsmagazine is on power, that is, politics and economics. In this scheme of things, then, religion is one of several ancillary departments of life—along with sports, education, the law, and so forth. At least that was the way it was when I first came to *Newsweek* in 1964. But it has changed since then because the culture has changed. Secularism—or perhaps what Peter Berger has called, modernity—is no longer confident or integral. Questions of value are now news, even entertainment. One finds themes of sin and salvation in afternoon soap operas and images of Mormon theology in popular fantasies like *Star Wars*.

We have created a section which I am also responsible for which is called the Ideas section. It derived out of the religion section (which is internal history that might be sort of interesting in its implications). In trying to

describe what was happening at Vatican II, I had to deal with ideas. If you picked up *Newsweek* this week (31 August 1981), you would find a cover story on bioethics because our technology in that area has certainly outstripped our ethical thinking. Several years ago I did a piece on a former teacher of mine, a Jesuit, who now heads the Kennedy Center for Bioethics at Georgetown University, Richard McCormick, one of the big names in moral theology. At that time the story fell in my department, religion; now it's a cover story because everyone has to face up to these questions. The questions that used to be asked in the private precincts of religion are now, I think, being asked by the culture as a whole. So it's a very exciting time to be around.

III

I HAVE a fundamental difficulty with my assigned topic: the uses and abuses of religion. You see, I do not think that religion is useful at all. To be sure, we may say that religion provides believers with a sense of identity or answers to life's ultimate questions or a sense of at-homeness in the universe. But even these very worthy ways of talking about religion violate its essentially non-utilitarian spirit. We cannot pray in order to, love in order to, understand in order to, or even play in order to. Like all the really important things in life—wisdom, love, art, and, perhaps, a rare vintage wine—religion serves no purpose outside itself. It is literally use-less. "Taste the Lord and know that He is sweet," says the Psalmist. Just so.

It follows, then, that those who *use* religion abuse it. If, as Lord Acton declared, "absolute power corrupts absolutely," then religion with its appeal to and symbolic representations of the Absolute contains within itself the greatest power for corruption. Or so history instructs us. Dante knew what he was doing when he put certain popes in Hell. Nor is corruption to be found only among those who exercise authority in the name of revealed religion. Recall that it was in the name of the religion of natural virtue that Robespierre destroyed his enemies and that the Festival of the Supreme Being, June 1794, when the new religion was solemnly inaugurated, also marked the climax of the Terror.

What I object to is the instrumental view of the human spirit which lies behind all the religious busy-ness we see today. We are told to "get" religion in order to "be saved," as if religion were just another consumer product. We are told to apply our religion to our daily lives, as if religion were something separate from daily living. We are told to use the "resources" of religion to reform society or to "achieve" peace of mind or—and I quote from an evangelical book catalogue—to lose weight, "the Christian way."

This corruption of the spirit is perhaps inevitable in a society whose principal injunctions are to get, to get ahead, and, and, often enough, to get even. In such a society it is altogether appropriate that we should celebrate as "the first American," Benjamin Franklin, a busy man if ever there was one. He was also a "utilitarian of the spirit," as D. H. Lawrence called him, a man who could recommend honesty as "the best policy" because he could find no intrinsic value in that virtue.

But it seems to me that religion is less a way of doing

than a way of being; at least, ways of doing flow from ways of being. Furthermore, it seems to me that ways of being religious are not—or at least ought not—to be conceived as altogether different from being human.

Mystery and transcendence are mankind's natural element. "Man is born into a world that he has not made," Christopher Dawson reminds us, "a world that he cannot understand and on which his existence is dependent." In actual fact, Dawson goes on to observe, "social authority and the world of culture take hold of him and thrust back the frontier of transcendence behind the authority and omniscience of parents and schoolmasters. It is only in the poetic imagination, which is akin to that of the child and the mystic," Dawson concluded, "that we can still feel the pure sense of mystery and transcendence which is man's natural element."

Jesus put it another, characteristically simpler way:

WE MUST PRESERVE AND DEVELOP OUR INHERENT SENSE OF WONDER—WHICH IS A GOOD DEAL MORE THAN MERE INTELLECTUAL CURIOSITY. IT IS AN ATTITUDE TOWARD THE EVERYDAY WORLD WHICH FINDS THAT WORLD MARVELOUS.

"Unless you become as little children, you cannot enter into the Kingdom of Heaven."

What Jesus meant, among other things, is that we must preserve and develop our inherent sense of wonder—which is a good deal more than mere intellectual curiosity. It is an attitude toward the everyday world which finds that world marvelous. Children, as they lose their initial naivete, learn to take the socially-constructed world of parents and teachers for granted. But adults, if they are to be genuinely religious, must develop a second naivete in order to reenter their naturally religious element—that is, they are to wonder.

In a lecture on writing some decades ago, the novelist Flannery O'Connor said that what the religious novelist does is present "mystery through manners, grace through nature." To wonder, then, is to draw into the mystery revealed through manners, the grace disclosed by nature. To wonder is to discern the extraordinary because ordinary is extraordinary for those who have eyes to see and ears to hear.

Such a person was the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins who manifested in several poems what happens when sight is transformed by religious insight. Consider one of his most famous poems, "God's Grandeur":

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
Crushed. Why do men then now not reck his rod?
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
And all is seared with trade; blearied, smeared with toil;
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell:
the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.
And for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
And though the last lights off the black West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs—
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright
wings.

RELIGION CONFRONTS US WITH SYMBOLS IN WHICH THE UNIVERSAL AFFIRMATIONS OF TRUTH ARE DISCLOSED IN PARTICULARS OF TIME, PLACE, AND HUMAN CONSTRUCTION.

Hopkins was, among other things, a Victorian nature poet as well as a disciplined Jesuit priest. He had the gift of wonder, together with the gift of faith and the gift of language. He was able, therefore, to pass beyond the purposeful world of work, where things have their uses, to the world where things only have meaning—and therefore beauty. In that world, the real world, things are astonishing simply because they *are*. The real world forces upon us the basic question of philosophy: why is there something rather than nothing?

Children, as we all know, are natural philosophers. When they wonder, children ask all the big questions. "Where did I come from?" "What happens when you die?" "Where is God—why can't I see him?" Such questions arise not only from the mind but from the heart as well. "Thou has made us for thyself, O Lord," declares St. Augustine, "and our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee." Children not only want to know what God is *like*, they want to know him the way they know their own parents. They want an emotional attachment because with such attachments are the cement of human connections. It is through emotions that we join and respond to others. They become a part of us and we a

part of them. Without emotions we can know *about* each other but we cannot *know* each other. And it is through the ordinary experience of human connections, the disappointments as well as the exaltations, that we gain a glimmer of the Divine embrace. As Dante discovers somewhere near the end of *The Divine Comedy*, the love that Beatrice moved in him is the same love that moves the sun and all the other stars and is the heart of God.

In sum, I am arguing that to be religious is to be fully aware, to be caught up in the mystery simply because we exist. And yet, we are usually so busy, we adults, getting and spending, as the poet said, that we "lay waste our powers"—chiefly the power of insight into the extraordinariness of the ordinary. "This is not the same as 'everydayness,'" an affliction of the literal-minded which novelist Walker Percy has dramatized so brilliantly. To be literal-minded is to submit one's spirit to a banal purposefulness that has no real purpose. The Psalmist had an antidote for this purposefulness. He said: "Be still and know that I am the Lord."

Religious tradition teaches us to "hallow the everyday," in the delicious phrase of the late and wonderful Rabbi Abraham Heschel. Or at least it should teach us that, and in so doing we glimpse the extraordinary in the ordinary, after the manner of the child, the poet, the mystic. But most of us adults are robbed of such insight. That is why mankind needs a Sabbath, a day not so much to rest as to be at rest, which is to say to desist from useful activity in order to recognize and celebrate the useless, the given. Sometimes I think that if I were organizing a Moral Majority my first goal would be to require everyone to make love, in one form or another, on the Sabbath; then perhaps we would begin to understand, after all, what Sabbath worship is all about.

IV

TO say that religion comes naturally to humankind is not to say that there is something called "natural religion." There is, thank God, no Church of Religion-in-General. There are only particular religious traditions. To be religious, then, is to address our heart's questions to a particular tradition, to be formed and informed by a particular way of being human.

But is this not a narrowing of options, a premature closing off of experience? Haven't all of us, really, at one time or another yearned to be free of our own tradition? Or at least of its narrower intellectual constructions or behavioral prohibitions? Moreover, isn't religion just another "social construction of reality," to borrow one of Peter Berger's many useful phrases, set alongside others?

To all these rhetorical questions, the answer is "yes." To which I add, "Of course." But just as art presents us with what T. S. Eliot called "concrete universals," so religion confronts us with symbols in which the universal affirmations of truth are disclosed and enclosed in particulars of time, place, and human construction. These are, in the brilliant analysis of theologian David Tracy, the "classics" of each tradition. Because we are human, that is to say, bound by bodies, time, space, and the horizons of our own history and experience, we come to understand the whole, if at all, through the prism of the particular. The classic in

religion, Tracy instructs us, is like the classic in art: a disclosure of the universal in the particular.

To be religious, then, is to be gifted with a tradition, a patrimony by which we interpret human experience and which, in turn, is interpreted afresh by our own experience. Religious traditions supply us with roots and horizons: by our participation in the symbolism of religion, we discover where we have come from and where, God willing, we are headed. What traditional religions have in common, suggests sociologist Robert Bellah, is a general skepticism that modern ideologies will provide an adequate response to the human condition. More specifically Bellah writes:

The traditional religions [by which he means those of the East even more than those of the West], however variously they may express it, hold forth an ideal of human fulfillment, both personal and interpersonal, that goes far beyond the search for wealth and power, comfort and control, because it promises to bring human life into some kind of harmony with the Holy or the God . . . that transcends it.

(I would like to suggest that the less traditional a religion is the more conformed it is to one or another current ideology. Christian fundamentalism, for example, is short on tradition and so it is not surprising to find that it



fits so well with the current conservative social and political ideology in this country. Or so it seems to me.)

To borrow again from Peter Berger, we can say that to the extent that people are rooted in a religious tradition, to that extent they are "cognitive deviants" from the prevailing norms of contemporary society. To be sure, this deviation also separates us each from the other but it also binds us. We are, all of us, heirs to a particular religious tradition—Mormon, Adventist, Christian Scientist, Protestant, Jewish, Catholic. The paradox of our particularity is that we can come to understand each other because we have previously come to understand the universal as it has been disclosed in the pressure of particulars—particular stories, ways of behaving, thinking, and feeling. Not only are we cognitive deviants, we are also behavioral deviants and, what is seldom talked about, "affective deviants" (a phrase that, for once, I can attribute to no one but myself). Religious tradition, then, confers upon its heirs a particular sensibility which is something much more inclusive than doctrines to believe or morals to uphold. It is, in Erich Heller's felicitous definition, "the tissue of unconsciously held convictions about what is real and what is not."

V

HOW is a religious sensibility passed on from one generation to the next? Through a religious community. Permit me to be concrete—and personal—by illustrating from my own experience of growing up Catholic at a particular time and place. With this, I ask you to analogize to your own experience.

There was a time, not so long ago, when Roman Catholics were very different from other Americans. They belonged not to public-school districts, but to parishes named after foreign saints, and each morning parochial-school children would preface their Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag with a prayer for Holy Mother the Church. When they went to Mass—never just a "Sunday service"—Catholics prayed silently with rosaries or read along in Latin as if those ancient syllables were the language Jesus himself spoke. Blood-red vigil candles fluttered under statues and, on special occasions, incense floated heavily about the pews. Kneeling at the Communion rail, their mouths pinched dry from fasting, the clean of soul were rewarded with the taste of God on their tongues—mysterious, doughy and difficult to swallow. "Don't chew the Baby Jesus," they were warned as children, and few—even in old age—ever did.

The Catholic Church was a family then, and if there were few brothers in it there were lots of sisters—women with milk-white faces of ambiguous age, peering out of long veils and stiff wimples that made the feminine contours of their bodies ambiguous too. Alternately sweet and stern, they glided across polished classroom floors as if on silent rubber wheels, virginal "brides of Christ" who often found a schoolroom of 60 students entrusted to their care. At home, "Sister says" was a sure way to win points in any household argument.

Even so, in both church and home, it was the "fathers" who wielded ultimate authority. First, there was the Holy Father in Rome: aloof, infallible, in touch with God. Then there were the bishops, who condemned movies and sometimes Communism; once a year, with a rub from a bishop's anointing thumb, young men blossomed into priests and Catholic children of 12

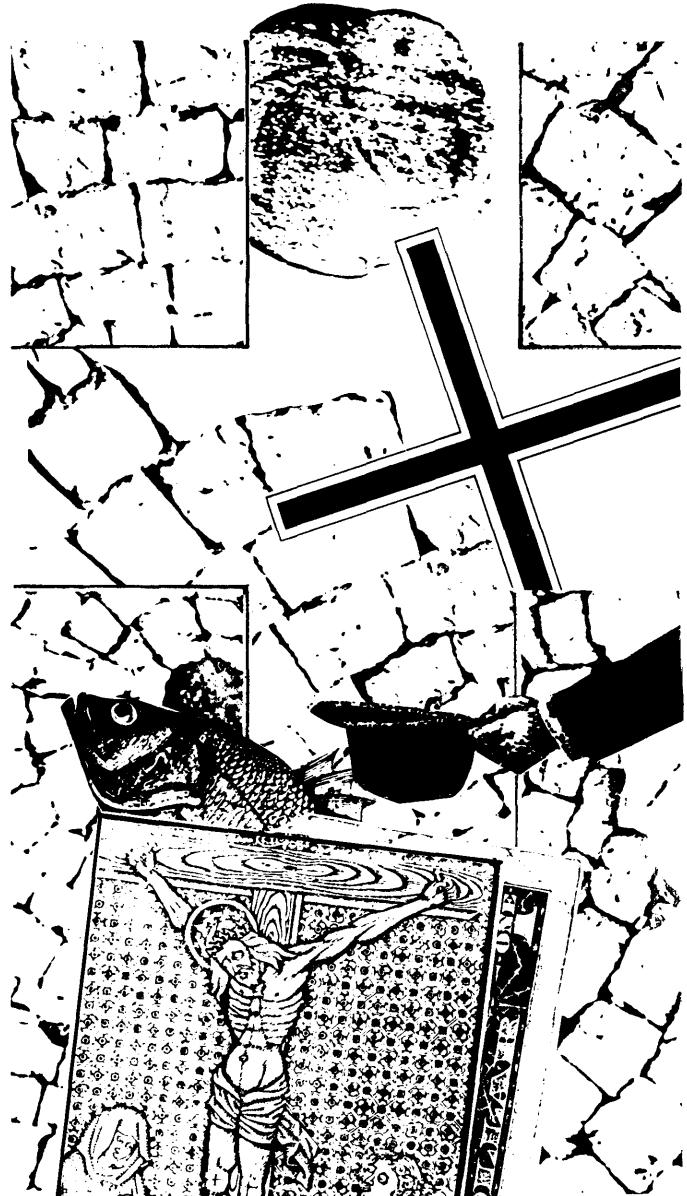
became "soldiers of Jesus Christ." But it was in the confessional box on gloomy Saturday nights that the power of the paternal hierarchy pressed most closely on the soul. "Bless me Father, for I have sinned," the penitent would say, and in that somber intimacy, sins would surface and be forgiven.

There were sins that only Catholics could commit, like eating meat on Friday and missing Sunday Mass. But mostly, the priests were there to pardon common failings of the flesh, which the timid liked to list under the general heading of "impure" thoughts, desires and actions. Adolescent boys dreamed of marriage, when it would be OK by God and the fathers to "go all the way." But their parents knew full well that birth control was not included in such freedom. Birth control was against God's law, all the fathers said, and God's law—like Holy Mother the Church—could never change.

As some of you may recognize, these are the opening paragraphs of a cover story I wrote some years back for *Newsweek*. Despite their public character, they accurately reflect my own personal experience and that of many others, I think, who were raised in the integral Catholic subculture that existed in this country prior to Vatican Council II but exists no more.

Note, if you will, the basic image: the church then was an extended family of familiars who mediated on religious roots and projected our ultimate horizons. Though derived from a specific tradition, this subculture was internally diverse and touched on practically all of human experience. Our ethnic roots were many—Irish, Italian, East European, and suburban polyglot like my own. Yet we were united under the common symbol system of a church which traces its ancestry back to an itinerate rabbi in ancient Israel. We experienced as intimates both those who were vowed to marriage and those to lifelong celibacy. Schooled for achievement and action, we received as models saintly contemplatives.

To be sure, there were limitations placed on our intellectual formation and our behavior, especially our sexual behavior, which received an exaggerated degree of policing, as I recall. We were, I think, the only young people who lived well beyond adolescence before discovering that there was another, more commonly



accepted definition of the word, "ejaculation," than the one used by the church. To the church, it meant a short prayer said in moments of crisis, "Mary, Mother of God, help me." But having special language and special sins that only Catholics could commit made us feel different, morally superior—an absolutely essential ingredient, I suppose, for any tradition which claims to be the one true church, as most churches do. In short, we were "tribal," to use Martin Marty's word, but not, I think, insular. We were too different among ourselves to be terribly insular. We were, in the best sense of the phrase, hyphenated Americans, where the first term of that phrase, Catholic, stood for traditions that had coexisted in many cultures, many epochs.

Finally, we were tutored through our senses. The sound of Latin, the smell of incense. As liturgical seasons came and went, we learned that red was the color of the martyrs, green the color of hope, black meant death, purple suffering, white glory. Only the blue and gold were omitted from the liturgical rainbow. But that was all right because they were the colors of the Notre Dame.

WE HONOR TRADITION BY BRINGING OUR HEARTS' MOST PRESSING QUESTIONS TO IT, BY TURNING CHILDHOOD ANSWERS INTO QUESTIONS FOR ADULTS

football team.

Through all our pores, therefore, we developed a Catholic sensibility, something even lapsed Catholics cannot seem to shake. Because, as I wrote in *Newsweek*,

When the Catholic faith runs deep, it establishes a certain sensuous rhythm in the soul, a sacramental sensibility that suffuses ordinary things—bread, water, wine, the marriage bed—and transforms them into vehicles of grace. In these spiritual depths, doctrines and church laws fade in importance. “I am long past the childish faith I tried to cultivate in my earliest years,” says novelist Katherine Anne Porter, still writing books at the age of 81. “But I cannot leave the church. I have tried to leave, but the church has a hold on me. It’s a sort of home for me, my home, the only one I really have.”

I have quoted my own words at some length for several reasons. First, they emphasize my conviction that religion is not just something that has to do with belonging to a church, but to a people. More important, religion is a relationship to the transcendent that colors and shapes the whole range of human experience, at least in principle. Everything that enters into one’s life becomes a spiritual relationship because spirit is relationship. Turned around, it is by examining how a people of a particular religious tradition understand and behave with regard to what we have in common—eating, sleeping, birth, sex, child rearing, death—we come to understand the particular sensibility of that religion. (That is, by the way, how I try to approach my subject matter as a journalist.) In that approach, dogmas, formal church behavior, codes of morality, and theology are only designs in the pictures. God, I’ve discovered, is in the details.

Many of you were raised under analogous circumstances, that is to say, your sensibility was fixed, in relation to the transcendent in the early part of life. Some of you, like Katherine Ann Porter, have probably tried to leave, after discovering the inevitable limitations of childhood faith. Yet most of us recognize that what we received then is the only home we will ever know.

VI

We also recognize that integral religious subcultures, like the Catholic one I described, no longer exist in this country, except for those who live on the margins of American society. And even if they did exist, they would not sustain us as adults. Adults must take personal responsibility for their religious way of being, especially in a highly pluralistic society such as ours. This means that individuals, like churches must reinterpret their own traditions. We do this by our behavior in any case, but if we care for the tradition then we must also do it in a public, communal way. A tradition which is merely repeated and not reinterpreted dies. It becomes a museum.

What does it mean, in the most general way, to reinterpret a tradition? Here is how I would try to answer that question. Religion shapes group and personal sensibilities by providing symbolic words, images, and actions which reveal the extraordinary in the ordinary. Unfortunately, these same symbols can block the transcendent by becoming too familiar, pat, domesticated. When this happens, the extraordinary

becomes the ordinary and ceases to reveal mystery. Let me give you a simple, homey example. I have on a wall in my home a slick, modernistic crucifix of bronze which, when I bought it, symbolized to me something of what I took to be the universally human character of Christ’s Crucifixion—namely the universality of suffering. But I have long since become habituated to that crucifix.

Not long ago, however, I received a crude crucifix of wood from Latin America on which the Christ figure seems to writhe with the flesh and blood agony of the socially suppressed peoples of that continent. Staring at it I realized how much of my own comfortable well-being has distanced me from the central symbol of my own religion. In short, I gained a new insight into my own tradition—and into myself—from a symbolic reinterpretation.

If classic religious symbols can become opaque, that is, negate their very function as windows onto the transcendent, so much more easily can religious authorities. Recall the words of Christopher Dawson, quoted earlier. “Social authority and the world of culture,” he said, “can take hold of the child and thrust back the frontiers of transcendence behind the authority and seeming omniscience of parents and schoolmasters.” Church authorities can and do do just this by thwarting the natural and necessary thrust toward reinterpretation, not only by intellectuals but by anyone thirsting for the transcendent. The paradox is cruel: the defenders of tradition become its mummifiers precisely when they pretend to certitude rather than humility. We honor tradition by bringing our hearts’ most pressing questions to it, by turning childhood answers into questions for adult selves. That is the way adults recover the sense of wonder.

The enemy of faith, then—and yes, of wonder—is certitude. No one knows God with certitude. Every tradition, being a human response to the divine, conceals even as it reveals his face. We cannot be certain of God any more than we can be certain of ourselves or of those we love. Indeed, as theologian John Dunne has amply demonstrated, the more we try to make sure of another’s friendship or love, the more uncertain we become. And the more we try to make certain of ourselves, the more we lose ourselves in uncertainty. How much more true is this of God who so transcends all our categories of thought and desire?

But the kind of religion we hear about today, the kind that is sold on television and door to door is the kind that appeals to insecure people seeking false certitude. In short, it is false religion. Jesus did not teach certitude but understanding. He himself learned through experience and growing insight what it meant to call God “Abba” or Father. He established a relationship with the Father so intimate that those who proclaimed him the Christ saw in Jesus—especially his suffering and death—not only an act of atonement for sin but, as the evangelist John put it, “the way, the truth, and the light.” The way entails a quest, the truth a relationship, and the light an understanding. If I were an advice giver, I would warn against those who deny the quest, cheapen the truth, and block understanding. These are the true and everpresent abusers of religion.

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