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## What's Wrong With Being Right? - 1996

Mary Jo Weaver

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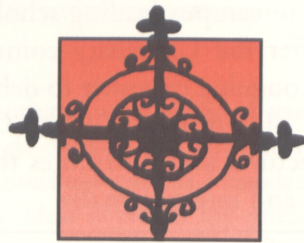
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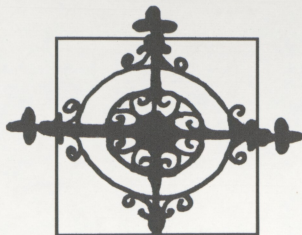
**What's Wrong With Being Right?**

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In 1994, through the generosity of the Bannan Foundation, the Department of Religious Studies at Santa Clara University inaugurated the Santa Clara Lectures. The series brings to campus leading scholars in Christian theology, who offer the University community and the general public an ongoing exposure to debate on the most significant issues of our times. Santa Clara University publishes these lectures and distributes them throughout the United States and internationally.

Dear readers:

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## What's Wrong With Being Right?

By Mary Jo Weaver

Let's imagine ourselves in an international religious portrait gallery, ambling through rooms decorated with moving likenesses of founders, sages, and saints. Making a right turn in the middle of the building, we come to a wing devoted to "fundamentalists" where we are not surprised to find pictures of American Protestants like Bob Jones, Dwight Moody, and Jerry Falwell. If we are media savvy, we are not perplexed by designer photographs of recent Iranian religious leaders, Middle Eastern terrorists, and a community of Theravada Buddhists in Sri Lanka. But when we come to a painting of Pope John Paul II, or an artistic rendering of a crowd of American Catholics standing quietly in a backyard in Georgia waiting for the virgin Mary to appear to the lady of the house, perhaps then we might begin to wonder. What *is* fundamentalism, and how did Catholics get included in it?

For the past decade, an international group of scholars has argued that fundamentalism is a useful description of a religious mentality shared by certain segments of all religious movements.<sup>1</sup> Fundamentalists are religious believers who, to borrow ideas of two of my colleagues, are "cornered by secularism."<sup>2</sup> Although they represent quite different religious and cultural contexts, they share a bellicose vocation: they fight *back*, against the world, in a reactive way; they fight *for* the victory of a particular world view, usually one where feminism and pluralism do not exist; they fight *with* a chosen repertoire of sources, usually located in the past and selectively interpreted; and they fight *under* God or some other transcendent referent.<sup>3</sup>

If fundamentalism can be defined in those terms, then surely some American Catholics belong in the category. Like their counterparts in other world religions, fundamentalist Catholics are belligerent defenders of the faith. Like their co-religionists in times past, they define the church in authoritarian terms and see unconditional obedience to the pope as a minimal requirement for membership. Like their companions on the right wing of the political bell curve, they believe that environmentalism, feminism, gay rights, and multiculturalism threaten the will of God as it is expressed in American values.<sup>4</sup> To be sure, Catholics with these views do not call themselves fundamentalists, or even conservatives. In the words of a devoted watcher of Mother Angelica's Eternal Word Television Network, "there is no right or left Catholicism, there are no conservatives or liberals, only Catholics in good standing and wayward ones."<sup>5</sup> Who are these "Catholics

in good standing,” or, as I prefer to call them, right-wing Catholics?

## Being Right, the Book

The book I edited with Scott Appleby, *Being Right: Conservative Catholics in America*,<sup>6</sup> is an effort to answer that question by presenting exemplary conservative groups in their own words and in analyses by historians and sociologists. Paradoxically, although I began the project hoping to foster a discussion that might lead to mutual understanding, I finished it believing that no such dialogue is possible. I now agree with Robert Wuthnow: When liberal and conservative members of religious institutions learn more about one another, the distance between them widens. “The history of religious prejudice has so often shown,” he says, “that grains of truth become deserts of misunderstanding...tension [appears to be] rooted more in the presence of contact than in its absence.”<sup>7</sup>

Why is that statement counterintuitive? Why is “getting to know you” not a happy song for right- and left-wing members of religious movements? Representatives of each group share a religious heritage, profess the same creed on Sundays, and are, in most ways, perfectly affable people. They are two aspects of a single religion, are they not? I used to think so. I used to argue that politically antagonistic Catholics inhabited divergent mental universes but were able to transcend their differences in a shared faith. The disparities were, to me, embodiments of universality, Catholicism at its multifaceted best.<sup>8</sup>

Although I still believe that the future of the church requires respectful attention to disparate viewpoints, I no longer believe that most conservative Catholics are capable of such tolerance, or that they harbor any desire for dialogue with people like me. It was not until I began to work directly with right-wing Catholics that I experienced such futility around conversation and saw—as if for the first time—that my previous appeals for mutual understanding had always been directed at left-wing audiences. I had never worked with a group so willing to ignore different points of view in the security of its own certainty. My frustration prompted me to review my own religious and intellectual history, to try to explain to myself why I was involved in a project with people who would probably be more comfortable if I would just disappear from the church.

## Being Right in the 1950s

Let me describe my own journey from the smug Catholicism of the 1950s, through the unsettling skepticism of the 1960s, to the divided world of the 1990s. I speak as a liberal feminist, but I was not reared to be one. Indeed, had I remained in the mental universe I was born into, or had that world itself not changed dramatically in the 1960s, I might today be tempted to welcome the pugnacious Catholicism of someone like Pat Buchanan. His autobiography, *Right from the Beginning*,<sup>9</sup> is a statement of my early Catholic life. We were right and we knew it.

When I was growing up—in a small, Midwestern Klan town—being right was the only perk I could find in being Catholic. For the first six years of my school life, I was pounced upon by bullies who bloodied my nose because I was a “cat-licker.” During high school I was constantly put on the defensive by Protestant peers who quizzed me on the arcane aspects of Catholic sexuality. My ability to lead a group through the labyrinthine logic of petting protocol or to explain the rhythm method probably gave me a social value I would not otherwise have had. As I was trained to “defend the faith” against non-Catholics, kept from dating Protestant boys, and encouraged to find everything I needed within a minuscule and rather backwater community, the only comfort I had was certainty. In the world of ultimate values, I knew I was right.

My preconiliar Catholic vocabulary was impressively noncumenical. On Good Fridays we prayed for “perfidious Jews” and “obdurate Protestants” in the pious hope that they would see the error of their ways and ask to join the true church. An education beginning with *The Baltimore Catechism* and ending in apologetics classes taught me that error has no rights.<sup>10</sup> Being Catholic in the 1950s meant being right about God and belonging to a church whose leaders did not make mistakes.

I went to a small college where the curriculum was deeply Catholic. Melville, Dante, and Freud were valued for their power to illustrate Catholic truths: By learning the moral uses of literature, the beauty of the medieval world, and the evils of psychoanalysis, I found a more sophisticated way to be right. Like many Catholic students of my generation, I studied Thomas Aquinas and graduated with an enviable confidence in my ability to prove the existence of God and defend the moral nature of the universe without a clue that my arguments were totally unconvincing outside of a Catholic framework.

## Being Catholic in the 1960s

In 1964, with a degree in chemistry and my Catholic approach to liberal arts, I went to work for a pharmaceutical company as a lab rat. Although I had only moved from Ohio to Michigan, I felt as if I had somehow landed on another planet. As one who had learned exactly what Hawthorne meant when he wrote "The Birthmark," I had no way to participate in conversations with people who thought that short stories were amenable to many interpretations. I soon discovered that my colleagues had no interest at all in "the moral" of a movie. My friends kept telling me that there was no right way to see a play, no right way to read a novel. My lab partners complained that I began every argument with an answer rather than a question.

I did not know what to make of these people with whom I worked except to say that they were scientists, skeptical by nature. If I had had the language for it then, I would have called them secular humanists. And, had I been able to use the language of my past, I would have worried that my environment was a "near occasion of sin," i.e., a seductive danger to my soul. As I began to adjust to this new world, however, I found it congenial. I could look at the universe in a different way and not lose my faith or quit going to church. I *did* learn to keep my religion to myself, which was an implicit recognition that religious belief was a private matter, usually not interesting to others. In relation to the world I grew up in—where we paraded our faith in public—I was now somewhere else.

### Two Different Worlds

Although Catholicism is, in some sense, one religion, I do not think it is far-fetched to say that right- and left-wing Catholics live in parallel universes that will never meet. A traveler can get from one to the other, but only once in his or her lifetime. Those who have moved from right to left, from preconciliar insularity to postconciliar expansiveness cannot go back. Those who remember the devotional world of an earlier era might want to import the religious atmosphere of another time to their new home, but they do not want to return to the narrowness that often supported their piety.

The Catholic world that nourished my youth was a society in which members were identified as such and nonmembers did not count. It was nonpluralistic because it was confident about its own explanations for everything. Why talk to people with partial truths when you have absolute truth? By following the rules, obeying God's representatives on earth, and

learning the governing principles of philosophical arguments, we were unassailable members of an ancient, divinely guided, unchanging religion. Outsiders could be legitimately ignored or condemned. We were warned about the dangers of other worlds—secularism, for example—but were permitted to visit them for purposes of work or education. Most of us were expected to stay rooted in home soil.

The secular world I found after college was vast and confident, like medieval Catholicism, but unlike the religion of the Middle Ages, it was pluralistic, scientific, and tolerant of radically different views. Divisions between "them and us" were racial or ethnic, not religious, and it was considered virtuous to work toward their eventual abolition. My friends were agnostic about God's will and iconoclastic about religion, but they were engaged in a wide variety of social justice issues. If I was at first a little fearful of being absorbed into this universe, I was given a major push in its direction by the church, itself, in the Second Vatican Council (1962–65).

### Vatican II and Its Aftermath

Vatican II occurred within the context of the war in Vietnam, the emergence of the third world, the invention of new technologies, and other fractious events. Its implementation in the United States coincided with civil rights activism and urban riots; political assassinations and scandals; youthful rebellion and the rise of a counterculture associated in the popular mind with women's liberation, sex, drugs, and rock-and-roll. The overall sense of social disintegration, coupled with dizzying changes in liturgical practice and in Catholic attitudes toward other religions, had the effect of separating Catholics from one another.

The division between those who welcomed the council and those who resisted it marked a new moment in American Catholicism. Although Catholics had experienced antagonistic differences in earlier times, they were not like this one. Nativism and other forms of Protestant/Catholic hostility were external conflicts that united us. If we separated into different ethnic parishes for two or three generations, that internal problem resolved itself with time. The pull I felt from two different worlds in the early 1960s—the comforting Catholicism of my youth and the enticing secularism of my 20s—seemed to be a personal issue with no repercussions in the community. But after 1968, the divide was ominous: American Catholics were increasingly described in bipolar terms as liberal or conservative, hierarchical or communitarian, postconciliar or pre-Vatican II.

Those who longed for religion as it used to be—in the 1950s, or in the Middle Ages—held on to the isolated splendor of preconciliar Catholicism. Those who imagined an updated church—confident and at home in the modern world—mixed secular values with an enthusiastic endorsement of the council. Both groups eventually professed to accept Vatican II, but in quite different ways. Conservatives tended to interpret conciliar teachings in a strict constructionist way, pointing to texts that underscored papal authority, religious habits for nuns, and cautious implementation of liturgical transformation. Liberals focused on the changes recommended by the council, pointing to a future where the church could welcome dialogue with non-Catholic religions, the modern world, and its own too-rigid past. If the aftermath of the council disclosed deep divisions within Catholicism—between those who resisted and those who welcomed change, for example—it did so with substantial help from church leaders. Today, 30 years later, the ambiguities of the council are considerably more evident than they were in the 1960s. Documents that can sustain multiple and opposite readings do not enhance unity.<sup>11</sup>

Events since the council also have caused deep divisions within the American Catholic community. The publication of *Humanae Vitae* in 1968 raised questions about the limitations of papal authority in family planning and gave American Catholics legitimate grounds from which to criticize the authoritarian process with which the decision was reached.<sup>12</sup>

When liberals took advantage of the opportunity to dissent from this teaching, conservative Catholics claimed the moral high ground of Natural Family Planning (NFP) and argued that absolute obedience to the pope was the cornerstone of Catholicism. Conservative critics, fearful of dissent, castigated Catholics who rejected the encyclical by arguing that artificial birth control is a first step on a slippery slope leading to proabortion activism, feminism, or, in one bizarre reading, lesbianism.<sup>13</sup>

Finally, the emergence of new theologies has contributed to ideologically divergent expressions of Catholicism. The endorsement of liberation theology by the Latin American bishops at Medellin (1968) and Puebla (1979) encouraged some Catholic theologians—especially feminist and third world liberals—to work out the implications of theological positions that begin from experience rather than from a doctrinal proposition. Because liberation theologies often bring a hermeneutics of suspicion to the tradition, they are rigorously opposed by conservatives. In the last 20 years, differences of opinion on issues like women's ordination, shared decision

making in the church, and the so-called preferential option for the poor have hardened into deep divisions.

## Negotiating the Differences

My trek from a conservative, insular church to an expansive, liberal postconciliar Catholicism was a generic journey that replayed itself many times as I moved from theology to religious studies, from seminary teaching to a state university, and from unconsciousness in a patriarchal church to a feminist critical position. Oddly, these changes in my intellectual outlook did not impel me to leave the Catholic church. If anything, each new vista deepened and widened my appreciation for and rootedness in Catholicism, and because I did not choose to relinquish my past, I was constrained to explain it.

If Catholicism were one grand religious system with an impressive array of types, it made sense to me that each part would be as strong as its willingness to interact with others. The communitarian Catholicism of the 1950s and the pluralistic skepticism of the secular city; devotional preconciliar Catholicism and social justice oriented, postconciliar ecumenism; stern, bossy Mother Church and her wild sister, Sophia;<sup>14</sup> intrepid feminists and fearful patriarchs, all could learn from one another and grow. Having untangled my own experience, I imagined that I could help to resolve conflicts within the system.

So, I became a purposeful schizophrenic scrambling to negotiate the divisions. Aware of radical differences between mutually antagonistic systems—feminism and patriarchy, for example—I traveled from one system to the other trying to explain, to anyone who would listen, that mutual advantages were available if we would make the effort to understand one another. *New Catholic Women*,<sup>15</sup> for example, was addressed to feminists who saw in Catholicism a particularly odious embodiment of “the enemy,” and to nonfeminists who were dismissive of women's issues within the church. I believed that feminism and Catholicism working together could open deeper channels of religious understanding, that the energy of postconciliar Catholicism and the goodwill of Catholic feminists could create a more inclusive and stronger community.

I was not wrong conceptually, but I was seriously mistaken politically in thinking that the patriarchs were the least bit interested in listening to women. I should have paid closer attention to the late Marjorie Tuite's

frustrated assessment of the situation when she returned from the last “listening session” between some bishops and representatives of the Women’s Ordination Conference. “The don’t *want* us. They have *never* wanted us. And they never *will* want us,” she said. I heard her say it, and somewhere in myself I knew it was true; but I did not want to believe it. Put another way, I thought that it did not *have* to be that way. My personal history became a passport to the fantasy that women could find justice and opportunities for shared decision making in a patriarchal church. So, even though I knew that the Catholic church was the most entrenched antifeminist institution in the Western world, I thought it could be different. I did not change my mind on this until *Being Right*.

## Divisions Writ Large

Although I began my research into right-wing Catholicism with the general hope for reconciliation that I had brought to much of my feminist work, I learned quickly to modulate and, finally, to relinquish it. The split between right- and left-wing Catholics is probably inexorable because liberals thrive in a climate of dissent whereas conservatives, who stress obedience, cannot allow it to be part of any legitimate expression of Catholicism. The notion that there might be grounds for reasonable protest against institutional directions makes no sense to them. They respect tradition and long to preserve a Catholic identity; but if most Catholics want a better appreciation of their heritage, they do not need the fearful, Tridentine Catholicism that appeals to most right-wing Catholics.

Whitehead once said that it was sometimes better to be interesting than to be right. He was probably talking about liberals. Those who inhabit the universe of conservative Catholicism would rather be right. Because they obey the pope and brook no dissent, they take comfort in knowing that they *are* right. Yet, I believe that sense of security is rooted in fear: Right-wing Catholics dread the future, fear feminism, glory in insular thinking, embrace the worst parts of the past, and can only operate in a narrow intellectual world. I can cite some concrete examples of these tendencies by drawing on the interviews I did with various groups, and by looking back at the *Being Right* project.

**Dread of the future** In 1991 I spent a week with a Blue Army of Mary group in the Midwest. My hosts and their friends were perfectly gracious and kind, but also alarmed about the future of the church and the religious lives of their children. One woman had never taken her family on vacation

because she had read about “clown Masses” and liturgical dance and was determined to protect her children from such aberrations. Many of the men had stacks of newspaper clippings about priests leading the faithful astray with unorthodox advice, or theologians dismantling respect for authority by teaching modernism. Focused on the eschatological dimensions of Marian apparitions—warnings from Our Lady of Fatima, for example—and alive to signs of doom, they dread the coming apocalypse even if they believe it is necessary for purgation and rebirth. As loyal Catholics, they accept the Second Vatican Council, but think it has been wickedly misinterpreted by those who want to “Protestantize” the Catholic church.

Everywhere they look, they see ominous signs of disrespect for God. Women not wearing hats in church; laypeople on the altar; Communion in the hand; the demise of parish organizations like the Holy Name Society; the reluctance of nuns to wear habits; the propensity of bishops to meddle in politics; the failure of priests to stick to moral issues in their sermons; the general laxity around sexual issues and education all carry apocalyptic weight and suggest we are in the end times. The remedy? To stay glued to Mother Angelica’s Eternal Word Television Network, say the rosary, and try to protect one’s children. When the tradition is being trashed by the guardians of the tradition, the faithful can sense that God cannot tolerate much more.

**Fear of feminism** One summer I attended the annual meeting of the Institute for Religious Life, an organization founded by bishops and priests as a refuge for sisters who find LCWR (Leadership Conference of Women Religious) uncongenial.<sup>16</sup> The gathering was held at Our Lady of the Lake seminary in Mundelein, Ill., a palatial estate designed to look like Versailles, with its formal gardens and sloping circular staircases leading to a small mirror-smooth lake. It was another world. The only thing this setting had in common with neighboring Chicago was the heat. What it had in common with neighboring Catholic parishes, I could not discern.

I noticed four groups attending this meeting: *leaders* (bishops and priests who advise the sisters); *financial supporters* (older laypeople with expensive cars and clothing); *support staff* (young people whose name tags identified them as members of Miles Jesu, latter-day soldiers of Jesus); and *sisters* (200 nuns in full habits who had come to find mutual support and to listen to speeches). Mother Teresa had agreed to give the after dinner address, but canceled at the last minute. Liturgy was celebrated in a formal chapel with no laypersons on the altar, hymns in Latin, and no Communion in

the hand. Sermons and songs praised Mary's demure acceptance of God's will and made obvious connections between her obedience and the lives of the institute sisters. The final hymn, "Immaculate Mary," gathered themes of virginity, tradition, nostalgia, and desire together in a rousing anthem of cloistered solidarity.

The speakers all began their presentations by glorifying the anachronistic: They congratulated the sisters on being "real nuns," and talked enthusiastically about the rosary or Mass in Latin. They admired the fact that the sisters avoided a world riddled with pornography, infidelity, and abortion, all of which were somehow connected to feminism. In a culture beset by feminism, "real nuns" had an obligation to wear the habit, say the Divine Office, and provide a haven for faithful Catholics by pursuing traditional apostolates. Those "bad nuns" who worked in women's shelters, lived in the inner city, engaged in prison ministry, or worked in politics all violated the traditional understanding of a religious vocation.

The institute's view about women in the church, like that of Pope John Paul II, is deeply rooted in complementarity. In practice, at the meeting, womanly deference to male authority was everywhere in evidence. No nun would talk to me until she had asked permission from a priest, and one sister who recognized me as a feminist told me that we had nothing in common, and that in an earlier age I would have been excommunicated, or worse. As I contemplated the "or worse" aspect, I was reminded of a remark by Carolyn Heilbrun: "It is no accident that the new right, here and around the world, and the religious fundamentalists with whom they are almost coextensive, are driven first of all by the need to return women to their traditional place of powerlessness in society."<sup>17</sup>

**Glorified eccentricity** My own chapter in *Being Right*, "Self-Consciously Counter-Cultural," featured Catholic colleges founded since the council to protest the directions taken by Catholic higher education since the early 1960s. Thomas Aquinas College (Santa Paula, Calif.), Magdalen (Warner, N.H.), Christendom (Front Royal, Va.), and Thomas More (Merrimack, N.H.) are lay-founded, lay-led experiments in higher education linked by a shared belief in objective truth and the means to attain it. They are partly heroic, partly quixotic attempts to define a college curriculum in totally Catholic terms either by using some version of a Great Books approach or by providing a campus atmosphere that is saturated with Catholicism.

Students at Thomas Aquinas are also students of Thomas Aquinas, able to

prove the existence of God and defend the moral nature of the universe. The young men and women at Magdalen participate in a formation program that requires them to work one hour each day on campus tasks, attend mandatory study halls, observe a dress code, answer a nightly curfew, relinquish all entertainment equipment, and agree not to date other students. Christendom students learn to combine the truths of the Catholic faith with political engagement, but they do so under the inspiration of Mother Teresa's stimulating and comforting words, "we are called to be faithful, not successful." Students at Thomas More strive to become a deeply bonded Catholic community with a strong sense of an intellectual Catholic culture that they can pass along to the next generation. All of these colleges are small, liturgically traditional, and intellectually isolated from the outside world.

These new institutions of Catholic higher learning raise interesting questions but provide no very compelling answers. Historically, Catholic education has always tossed on the horns of a painful dilemma: Too much assimilation erases Catholic distinctiveness, yet too much attention to Catholic particularity can result in social retardation. All Catholic colleges work to resolve that dilemma in different ways, but because all of these colleges have chosen to remain tiny and to avoid the mainstream, they have no voice in Catholic higher education. Instead, they tend to glory in the fact that they are not successful by worldly standards and that they do not suit their students for conventional lives in a troubled world.

**Preserving the worst parts of the past** Catholics who want to educate their children at home using the books and ideas of an earlier age can turn to Our Lady of the Rosary Home School in Bardstown, Ky., or to Seton Home School in Front Royal, Va. Because catechisms published after the council contained sex education programs, some conservative Catholic parents decided to keep their children home and school them with *The Baltimore Catechism* and any other traditional textbooks they could find. Seton and Our Lady of the Rosary own and distribute Catholic textbooks from the 1940s and 1950s to their clients because they believe that it is the only way to insure that education is fully Catholic. One woman told me that "every subject, even handwriting, should teach something Catholic."<sup>18</sup> The books, statues, and prayer cards of the preconciliar era are, for homeschoolers, treasures of a Catholic culture to be passed on to the next generation.

I attended one home-schooling convention in Bardstown where I observed



that home-schoolers have large families and not large incomes. It is hard to imagine that there is much time for individual attention to children, and it is easy to see that older children spend a considerable amount of their time caring for younger siblings. More to the point, it seems clear that in many cases parents are not trained to do this important work and manage with a combination of determined effort and occasional gatherings where they can meet other parents, like the one in Kentucky.

The convention took place in a broken-down Catholic grade school where everything was old or worn out and where there was no evidence of any real academic help. Expert presentations were exceptionally thin in content, but high in praise for the trouper parents who sat in a hot, muggy gym for three straight hours of bad lectures. Since there was no child care for toddlers, some parents drifted in and out of the gym with fussy children. I stepped outside to talk to parents several times during that long afternoon. One father I interviewed said that he used to send his children to public school, but took them out when “they got ideas.” When I asked what he meant, he said, “I want my kids to learn facts, not opinions,” something I heard echoed several times in the next two days.

The Bardstown meeting was a combination pep rally (for parents) and a self-defense class (for kids). Parents were commended for working to save the souls of their children from “opinionated nuns,” and children were taught how to preserve their chastity and moral integrity in an evil world. Most presentations were highly critical of the contemporary church—its music, its lack of devotion to the rosary, its refusal to embrace sacrifice—and painfully nostalgic about the old Catholic school system (complete with Sister Mary Knuckle Smasher). The workshops for the children were sad and tired: 4- to 6-year-olds squirmed through a lecture on nutrition; 7- to 8-year-olds heard an old sister, in habit, explain to them that Mary, the mother of God, had been home-schooled; 9- to 11-year olds memorized Bible verses; and older children, crowded into desks too small for them, listened to an old priest regaling them with 1950s-style convert stories as a way to explain the glory of Catholicism. There *is* a glory to Catholicism: We have a rather impressive and compelling heritage. This was not it.

**A narrow intellectual world** *Being Right* brought together scholars and advocates of right-wing Catholicism and disclosed the flaw at the heart of the project. Because scholars begin with skepticism and ideologues start from first principles, or perhaps because scholars aim at coherence while advocates aim at truth, both groups tend to lose what they stand for when

they attempt dialogue. A discussion among right-wing Catholics starts with a set of presuppositions including a belief in God and in absolute truth; an assumption that God’s will can be known from Scripture and the teaching of the church; and a desire to be faithful to God by following church teaching. Scholars reject these assumptions because their profession demands that they begin with skepticism and proceed by way of critical inquiry to conclusions that may or may not be compatible with a particular faith perspective. When those two groups meet for dialogue, as they did in the *Being Right* project, it only works at a superficial level with everyone trying hard not to offend anyone.

Most of the right-wing Catholics whose essays are published in *Being Right* are members of the Fellowship of Catholic Scholars, an organization founded by those “who were alarmed by dissent” and whose members promise to accept “the entire faith of the church.”<sup>19</sup> Its Catholicism operates from a position of alienation. In embracing *Humanae Vitae*, it defends a Catholic teaching that a majority of Catholics have refused to accept. In describing feminists as those who despise men and “hate the church”<sup>20</sup> it sides with a patriarchal mentality that is maladaptive in the modern world. By confining theology to loyal implementation of Vatican pronouncements, it makes Catholicism boring.

Although I thought I was prepared for differences in basic perspective—I did not expect to find enthusiasm for experience-based theology, or feminism, for example—I was not ready for the level of discomfort I found in conservatives who, it seemed, were not able to relate to anyone who did not share their presuppositions. The kinds of people that one finds in regular academic life—feminists, smart people who do not agree with you, ethnic scholars, homosexuals, young radicals who want to replace the traditional Western canon, agnostics, to name a few—were regularly ridiculed and sometimes insulted by them. My goal of mutual understanding depended upon a level of civility—mostly demonstrated by the scholars, not by the ideologues—that disallowed genuine discourse.

## Conclusions

And, finally, that’s what’s wrong with being right. It avoids dialogue with outsiders in order to protect itself from contamination. It prefers the safe world of a shared outlook to the possibility of finding another point of view compelling. And it cannot afford to accept differences. Those qualities make it impossible for right-wing Catholics to make a significant con-

tribution to a future that requires innovative solutions to enormous pastoral and theological problems.<sup>21</sup> Those challenges will have to be met by a new, ethnically complex generation who never inhabited the world of American Catholicism circa 1920–1960, who never had the luxury, or the burden, of being right.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of the fundamentalism project see my review article, “Family Resemblances: The Fundamentalism Project” in *Cross Currents* (Winter 1993–94), 524–530.

<sup>2</sup> Jan Nattier, my colleague in Buddhism, explains the bellicose nature of fundamentalism by saying that they are believers who are “cornered.” Scott Alexander, my colleague in Islam, says fundamentalists are believers “with the volume turned up” whose primary enemy is secularism.

<sup>3</sup> These “fighting words” are Scott Appleby’s. See the introduction to *Fundamentalisms Observed* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

<sup>4</sup> See Leon Howell, *Funding the War of Ideas* (Cleveland: United Church Board for Homeland Ministries, 1995). Howell is a former editor of *Christianity and Crisis* who was commissioned to write this report on conservative foundations and the groups they fund.

<sup>5</sup> This quotation is from a letter to me by one member of a group I interviewed in Akron, Ohio, early in 1991. Like most of his friends, he insists that Catholics admit to the divine authority of the Scriptures and the pope: Both must be revered and confidently obeyed. His characterization is unusually kind: Often the alternative to Catholics in good standing is a demonized portrait of someone driven—by envy, malice, hatred, or bitterness—to destroy the church and all its works.

<sup>6</sup> *Being Right: Conservative Catholics in America* (Indiana University Press, 1995). This book is the direct result of a two-year series of meetings with conservative Catholics and scholars interested in right-wing Catholicism funded by the Lilly Endowment.

<sup>7</sup> *The Restructuring of American Religion* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1988), 216f.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, “Overcoming the Divisiveness of Babel: The Languages

of Catholicism” in *Horizons* 14 (fall 1987), 328–42, or “The Church They Longed for: Roman Catholic Fundamentalism” in *The Struggle Over the Past: Fundamentalism in the Modern World*, by William M. Shea ed. (Lanham, N.J.: University Press of America, 1993), 289–98.

<sup>9</sup> (Washington: Regnery Gateway, 1990). In his account of a Catholic childhood, Buchanan says that one fought for one’s beliefs anytime and with anyone. He describes his universe by saying, “We already had the truth” (70) and “There was a magnetism about our certitude . . . other ways were not equally valid, they were false” (72). One should note that although Buchanan seems eager to identify himself as a Catholic, some Catholic journalists are just as eager to deny it. See Peter Steinfelds, “Church on Buchanan: Judgment Day is Near” in *The New York Times*, March 3, 1996. See also Colman McCarthy, “Pat Buchanan, a Different Breed of Catholic” in *The National Catholic Reporter* 32 (March 15, 1996), 18.

<sup>10</sup> We learned, for example, that the ads in Saturday’s paper that urged everyone to “attend the church of your choice on Sunday” were a glaring example of the sin of *indifference* (as in the revolting statement by Jesus, “the indifferent I vomit from my mouth”). “Picture this scene,” said one of the nuns. “Suppose I put a yellow chalk mark on the board and ask you what color it is. One of you says red, another green, another white, and another yellow. At the end of this process, I say, ‘You are all equally right, my dears.’” We looked at her, waiting for further enlightenment. “How stupid can you get?” she asked with rhetorical fury, “We are not all equally right. One is right, and the others are wrong. That’s how it is. Catholics are right. *They* are wrong.” “But sister,” someone would usually protest, eager to save Protestant friends or relatives from being puked up out of the belly of God, “what if these people are sincere?” “Would you take your watch to a *sincere* blacksmith to be fixed?” she replied with that combination of smugness and pity that were marks of being right.

<sup>11</sup> See Guiseppe Alberigo, Jean-Pierre Jossua, and Joseph A. Komonchak, *The Reception of Vatican II* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1987), especially 1–44.

<sup>12</sup> See Robert Blair Kaiser, *The Politics of Sex and Religion: A Case History in the Development of Doctrine, 1962–1964* (Kansas City, Mo.: Leaven Press, 1985). Kaiser explains the ways in which the majority report of a papal commission was ignored by the pope, showing why many liberals think that in *Humanae Vitae* the church almost compelled reasonable peo-

ple to dissent from church teaching.

<sup>13</sup> Richard Roach, a Jesuit theologian reviewing Mary Daly's *Pure Lust* in a symposium for the journal *Catholicism in Crisis* (October 1984), says this: "Contracepting Catholic couples should sit down and read Daly's book. The wife in particular should ask herself is this is what I want? Is this how I really feel about men? If not, she should go to the medicine cabinet, throw out her contraceptive pills, march off to confession, and then take her husband to a good class in Natural Family Planning. Maybe they should even have a child. The alternative is some form, even though attenuated, of Daly's lesbianism" (42).

<sup>14</sup> Rosemary Haughton in *The Catholic Thing* uses these two figures to explain divisions within modern Catholicism. Mother Church is tradition, whereas Sophia is mysticism: One is more rooted in the past and interested in guarding against innovation, while the other is open to the future and sees the spirit leading the community to new and rather different places.

<sup>15</sup> Originally published by Harper and Row in 1985, this first book of mine on the women's movement and American Catholicism was reissued by Indiana University Press in 1996 with a new introduction.

<sup>16</sup> LCWR includes members from 90 percent of active women's religious orders in the United States. Those not represented by LCWR are not easy to place. Some of them used to belong to the Consortium Perfectae Caritatis, a conservative union of women religious. In September 1970, the report from the Conference of Major Superiors of Women (soon to become LCWR) about the future disturbed approximately 50 conservative women superiors who then met secretly with Thomas Dubay (right-wing leader of the Catholic "traditionalist movement"), seven bishops, and the apostolic delegate. After this meeting, the sisters withdrew from CMSW and formed their own organization. Other sisters not in LCWR joined the Institute for Religious Life, an organization of laypersons, bishops, and religious superiors highly conservative in orientation and background and funded by conservative laypeople. Today, the consortium and the institute have joined to form a new right-wing version of the Conference of Major Superiors of Women.

<sup>17</sup> In a private letter July 19, 1991.

<sup>18</sup> Interview with Mary Kay Clark, director of Seton Home School,

September 19, 1991.

<sup>19</sup> James Hitchcock, "The Fellowship of Catholic Scholars." *Being Right*, 190.

<sup>20</sup> Helen Hull Hitchcock, founder of Women for Faith and Family, in her introduction to *The Politics of Prayer: Feminist Language and Worship* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), says that "feminists hate the church" because it claims supernatural authority and because "it is unchangeably male. For feminists of both sexes, resentment against, if not hatred of, the male sex is the filter through which all existing institutions—especially religion and certainly including the language of worship—must be strained" (xxiv).

<sup>21</sup> R. Scott Appleby, "Crunch Time for American Catholicism." *The Christian Century*, April 3, 1996, 370–376. Appleby gives specific dimensions to problems of priest shortage; the short-sighted strategy of asking women to administer parishes but not allowing them to attend pastoral planning meetings; the lack of funds to pay for Catholic education; the pitiful levels of giving in Catholic churches; the massive influx of immigrants from Mexico and Latin American countries, but also from Vietnam, Korea, and other parts of the Far East; and the real detachment of a surprising number of Catholics from the central beliefs of their faith.