

[*The Catholic Experience in America*, Joseph A. Varacalli, Greenwood Press, 339 pages]

What the Bishops Hath Wrought

By Thomas E. Woods Jr.

JOSEPH VARACALLI is very much an unsung hero of American Catholic intellectual life. For decades he has quietly labored on behalf of the church, producing in the process a mountain of important articles and book-length studies written from the point of view of the orthodox faith. Against all odds, Varacalli even managed to get a Center for Catholic Studies established at Nassau Community College of the State University of New York, where he has taught sociology for many years. He argued that if the college took its commitment to multiculturalism seriously, it needed to make all cultural perspectives, including Catholicism, available to its students. As we all know, that argument never works. But it worked, somehow, for the indefatigable Varacalli.

Varacalli's latest book, *The Catholic Experience in America*, begins with a brief history of the Catholic Church in the United States and then examines it in light of important sociological categories like race, sex, age, and region. Varacalli likewise covers the Eastern Catholic churches in America, as well as some of the ethnic traditions by which the Catholic faith has been mediated over the course of the American experience. In each case, Varacalli guides the reader effortlessly through the pertinent literature. He does not break much new ground here, but that is not the point of this useful book, which describes the Catholic experience in America from its origins to the present in light of the findings of the most important scholarly research.

Varacalli borrows the helpful term

"plausibility structure" from Peter Berger to refer to the necessary social and intellectual milieu that makes a particular religious tradition a vital factor in the lives of its adherents and inclines them to remain faithful to it. Berger doubted that such a thing could exist in the pluralistic United States, whose religious diversity he thought would inhibit the creation of such a milieu. Varacalli has elsewhere taken issue with Berger's view, arguing that the church itself can create this plausibility structure, even when the surrounding culture is indifferent or hostile, by means of the mutually supportive bodies that comprise its institutional life, including parishes, universities, media outlets, professional associations, and voluntary organizations.

Without this plausibility structure in place, the combined effect of non-Catholic and anti-Catholic influences on the Catholic population is bound to lead a good portion of them in the direction of those influences and away from

of the successful implementation of the strategy to construct a Catholic subculture," Varacalli observes, "America was on its way to becoming, if not a Catholic country, a country with a powerful and united Catholic presence."

This is not mere bravado: opponents of this growing Catholic influence, like Paul Blanshard, once spoke openly of the "Catholic problem"—that is, the rapidly increasing influence and numbers that the Catholic Church in America could boast. The baby boom was itself a good example of this increasingly important subsection of American society: Lutheran scholar Allan Carlson described that jump in American fertility rates as "largely a Roman Catholic event" rather than an undifferentiated or religiously homogeneous social phenomenon.

What happened that brought this enormously influential and spiritually and intellectually vibrant institution to the debilitated state in which we find it

WHAT BROUGHT THIS ENORMOUSLY INFLUENTIAL AND INTELLECTUALLY VIBRANT INSTITUTION TO THE DEBILITATED STATE IN WHICH WE FIND IT TODAY?

Catholicism. According to Varacalli, "Given the fact that most people in any society 'worship' and consider 'sacred' the key values of that society's central value system"—what Emile Durkheim called the "collective conscience" of society—"it should come as little surprise that most ... contemporary American Catholics are 'nominally Catholic,' with some other set of socializing agents more fundamentally shaping their worldview, character, personality, and social and personal priorities."

Varacalli will have no truck with those who believe that the demands of Catholic obedience require them to disparage the pre-Vatican II church for its alleged failings. Varacalli speaks of the pre-conciliar church with deep respect and affection, for it had laboriously built and maintained the very structure whose absence Varacalli and the present writer now lament. "Precisely because

today? The usual answer is that the acid of secular modernity ate away at traditional Catholic life—a view not without merit, but whose explanatory power is not as strong as it first appears.

For one thing, to some extent the American bishops' de facto abdication of authority over American life and culture during the 1960s itself contributed to the success of the very cultural revolution that is said to have damaged the church so badly. It is hard for Americans, especially younger ones, to imagine a world in which Catholics, and even some non-Catholics, actually cared what the American bishops had to say. Today, apart from the occasional perfunctory statement on abortion that keeps the noisier rank and file happy, the bishops are all but silent (when they aren't recommending leftist economics). When they do speak on a matter of importance, no one even knows about

it. Had this hierarchical timidity not already been underway, the Catholic bishops—who at one time were a cultural force to be reckoned with—just might have helped stave off the worst effects of '60s liberalism.

More to the point, if Muslims in the West, as well as a good part of the Orthodox churches, have successfully preserved their respective identities in the face of modernity, then secularism and cultural revolution alone cannot account for the collapse of American Catholicism.

The fact is, no force has played a more decisive role in undermining the American Catholic plausibility structure than the American bishops themselves—with a few noble exceptions, to be sure. They have utterly failed to prevent, and in many cases have actually encouraged, horrific sex-education curricula, open dissent from Catholic moral teaching, and liturgical vandalism that would offend even a civilized pagan. Tod Brown, Bishop of California's Diocese of Orange, shouts and causes a scene when confronted with

ence in the American church, as “a bishop-maker who, working with former Archbishop Jean Jadot, gave the American hierarchy its pronounced pro-gay orientation.”

In the last two years of his life, Cardinal Bernardin's closest priest friends from his native Diocese of Charleston all faced charges of molesting young boys. “As his friends back in Charleston continued bugging little boys,” Likoudis remarked, “Bernardin used his influence, starting in 1968, as General Secretary of the U.S. Catholic Conference, to select bishops (many of whom are still ordinaries) who would, to put it charitably, condone and promote homosexuality as an acceptable lifestyle and tolerate the sexual abuse of children by priests.” As Bernardin was dying, incidentally, he requested that the Windy City Gay Men's Chorus sing at the cathedral at his wake—which they eventually did, from a spot right next to the altar.

The Bernardin saga is actually far worse than even these quotations suggest, but pursuing this matter is not our

lege and Thomas Aquinas College, as well as new and basically sound religious orders—well aware, of course, that all these admittedly good things are but a fraction of what the Catholic Church could once boast.

But just because the gates of hell will not prevail against the church does not mean that orthodox Catholics will not still be forced to endure some terrible times. Varacalli believes the orthodox core he identifies in his book, while vastly outnumbered, may still be able to restore the church to health, but that humanly speaking it is not assured that this wing will triumph in the short or medium run.

One thing we can be reasonably sure of is that the American church will not go into formal schism, as some fear and as Varacalli proposes as one possible future (though without necessarily believing it himself). Unless and until the Vatican decides it is more committed to upholding Catholicism around the world than it is to “collegiality,” a concept that has paralyzed Rome's power and will to act decisively to correct errant bishops, the American bishops can have all the leftism they like without the trouble of declaring a formal split with Rome. What would be the point of leaving if they can have exactly what they want right where they are?

On the other hand, Catholics can perhaps take comfort, if that is the right word, in the old saying that liberal Catholicism doesn't produce liberal Catholics, it produces non-Catholics. The Catholic population may well continue to decline throughout the Western world, but those who remain will disproportionately belong to the orthodox core to which Varacalli points as the church's hope for the future. At that point, perhaps, the rebuilding and re-evangelization—in short, the true restoration for which Catholics have waited for four decades—may finally begin. ■

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SECULARISM AND CULTURAL REVOLUTION ALONE CANNOT ACCOUNT FOR THE COLLAPSE OF AMERICAN CATHOLICISM.

a devout woman who simply wants to receive Holy Communion on her knees, but gives Communion to pro-abortion politicians without a moment's hesitation. We expect such cheerleaders of modernity to supervise and maintain structures designed to protect Catholicism from modernity's incursions?

Should you possess a perverse interest in coming face to face with the truly creepy—nay, sinister—poke around into the career of Joseph Cardinal Bernardin, the late Archbishop of Chicago, and see if you can say with a straight face that this was a pious, believing Catholic who did everything he could to uphold the honor of Christ and the church against the inroads of modern liberalism. Paul Likoudis of *The Wanderer* has described Cardinal Bernardin, a man of extraordinary influ-

purpose here. What matters is that somebody, somewhere, thought this was the best of all possible candidates to guide and shape the souls of a major American archdiocese. Innocent explanations for this do not immediately offer themselves. At the very least, we can say there is something deeply wrong with this picture—and that if we want to know where things have gone wrong, or why the Catholic plausibility structure lies in ruins, we need not look terribly far.

Varacalli believes, as any Catholic does, that the church possesses a divine promise that the gates of hell will not prevail against it. As evidence that a kind of restoration is already underway, he cites scholarly associations like the Fellowship of Catholic Scholars and the Society of Catholic Social Scientists, orthodox colleges like Christendom Col-

[*The Moral Imagination: From Edmund Burke to Lionel Trilling, Gertrude Himmelfarb, Ivan R. Dee, 259 pages*]

Imaginative Moralists

By W. Wesley McDonald

THIS COLLECTION of previously published essays offers portraits of notable figures in humane letters and politics exemplifying what Gertrude Himmelfarb describes as “the moral imagination.” Each essay deals with a particular thinker or writer of the modern era broadly understood: Edmund Burke, George Eliot, Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, Benjamin Disraeli, John Stuart Mill, Walter Bagehot, John Buchan, the Knox family, Michael Oakeshott, Winston Churchill, and Lionel Trilling. All of these figures are English, except for the American Trilling, and many are Victorians. Himmelfarb’s explanation for recycling her essays in this volume is “to do justice to the ideas of men and women who have enriched my life, the lives of generations before me, and, I hope, of those after me.”

Edmund Burke coined the term “the moral imagination” and uses it to rhetorical effect in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. The English statesman invoked the moral imagination in his defense of the traditional moral and social order of Europe, and he did so against the pernicious influence of the “sophisters, oeconomists, and calculators” who imagined that mankind could be governed by reason alone. Unlike his adversaries, Burke understood that the wisdom of life consists of imaginatively absorbing and processing human experience acquired through the accumulated wisdom of our ancestors, the lessons of history, prescriptive institutions, religious dogmas, and the visions of great poets. When the moral imagination functions in an impaired manner or ceases to function altogether, the com-

munication between generations becomes difficult. Even more ominously, distorted views of human nature arise and what follows is the decay of moral character.

“All the pleasing illusions, which made power gentle, and obedience liberal,” Burke predicted, would be swept away by the revolutionaries’ “conquering empire of light and reason.” With their disappearance would go the sentiments of reverence for one’s ancestors, solicitude toward posterity, honor, manners, loyalty, and gallantry that from time immemorial made humane social existence possible and gave life meaning and direction. “All the super-added ideas, furnished from the wardrobe of a moral imagination, which the heart owns, and the understanding ratifies, as necessary to cover the defects of her naked shivering nature, and to raise it to dignity in our own estimation, are to be exploded as ridiculous, absurd, and antiquated fashion.” After the “decent drapery of life” is “rudely torn off,” “a king is but a man; a queen is but a woman; a woman is but an animal; and an animal not of the highest order.”

This “barbarous philosophy,” which reduces human nature to mere interests and passions, would give rise to a tyrannical order. Eradicate the old institutions, customs, manners, and religion of Europe, Burke insisted, and the void will be filled by governments ruling by brute force. Ideologies that aimed at the transformation of society and human nature would disturb European political life for the next two centuries.

Himmelfarb praises Burke’s appeal to history and tradition in the opening essay of this volume but in the process makes an odd argument. She attempts to prove that Burke was an apologist for Judaism. Her claim is especially suspect, considering Burke’s controversial references in his *Reflections* to “Jew brokers” and “money-jobbers, usurers, and Jews.” The idea about Burke’s supposed Jewish affinities came to our author after an Orthodox Jewish student of hers indicated “how affected she was by Burke’s book which gave her a new

understanding and appreciation of Judaism.” This “brave and mature mind” discerned in Burke’s critique of the Enlightenment

an explanation and appreciation of her own religion, which draws upon all the resources of history and humanity to sustain and invigorate itself: ancient traditions, the origins of which may have been lost in time; institutions and establishments, sanctified by age and experience, which bind people together in the common existence of daily life; prejudices and superstitions that betoken the larger truths of virtue and wisdom; and, not least, the ‘moral imagination’ that gives heart and soul, as well as mind, to a living faith.

To see a direct parallel between Burke’s defense of traditional wisdom and the Orthodox Jewish way of life is something of a stretch. “No religion is as tradition-bound and history-centered as Judaism,” Himmelfarb affirms. While that may be true, the question remains whether Jews cling to their traditions for reasons that would correspond to Burke’s thinking. Burke made the case for tradition in response to the French revolutionaries, she explains, who “in destroying whatever of the past they could, also tried to destroy that most venerable of institutions, the church, thus denying the most basic of human impulses, religion.” Burke warred against the revolutionary mentality that objected to the past as an obstacle to be overcome in mankind’s march toward greater justice, equality, and freedom. He emphasized history as a source of imaginative insight and self-knowledge. For devout Jews, on the other hand, tradition serves a more practical end: the preservation of their group against assimilation and the maintenance of the special relation enjoyed by their nation to the God of the Old Testament. The more strictly they adhere to the 613 Mosaic commandments and to the accompanying Rabbinic dicta, the less likely they will associate with outsiders and be absorbed by larger, competing cultures. The point is