

DID THE DECLINE OF CATHOLICISM IN POST-
VATICAN II AMERICA HAVE TO BE SO STEEP AND IS
THE CLIMB BACK REALLY SO IMPROBABLE?: A FEW
QUESTIONS AT THE MARGINS

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The following comment expresses broad agreement with the Carlin thesis regarding the reasons leading to the decline in the health of the Catholic religion in the U.S. during the post-Vatican II era. Certain "questions at the margins" are raised, however, regarding such issues as: 1. whether or not both a more orthodox episcopal leadership and Catholic intellectual elite could have lessened and can now reverse the decline; 2. the definition of what "American" means and whether contemporary secular elites can legitimately claim an organic connection to that heritage; and 3. whether or not the self-destructive tendencies of contemporary secular social life and policy have set the stage for a renewal within both American civilization and the Church in America.

The Decline and Fall of the Catholic Church in America (Sophia Institute Press, 2003) represents a brilliant and lucidly written scholarly contribution to the field in the sociology of American Catholicism, a contribution whose importance, I strongly suspect, will perdure over time. Starting on a very personal note, let me point out both that the volume was written by a philosopher and sociologist and by a faculty member of a community college. The first fact suggests that the philosophical and sociological disciplines, with their host of potentially useful concepts, can be applied in a non-ideological and non-reductive manner to help elucidate and explain social reality and need not be viewed as necessarily antithetical to the religious realm. This review cannot possibly do justice to the number of profound and subtle insights that the author has made in his volume using, as he does, the best of the philosophical and sociological intellectual traditions. The second fact suggests that truth is truth regardless of its originating social

location. Indeed, perhaps, the socially peripheral location of the community college, vis-a-vis the elite centers of academia, actually makes it a tad bit easier these days to systematically address large issues of ethical import and violate present-day and pervasive politically correct thinking.

In his volume, author David R. Carlin provides a compelling general explanation for the dissolution of Catholicism in the United States in the latter part of the twentieth century. He also includes a series of social policy suggestions aimed at providing the Catholic Church with what he views as a slim but nonetheless fighting chance to rehabilitate herself and restore integrity to her house.

Summary of the Carlin Thesis

The *general* explanation, for the author, involves the confluence of three factors. The first, and apparently least important, is theological. The author argues that the changes called for by Vatican II had the effect of undermining, in at least the eyes of many Catholics, the tradition and stability of the Catholic heritage. The second factor might be termed social or demographic. The weakening of the Catholic inner city enclaves or, conversely, the move of Catholics into the suburbs and up the American socio-economic ladder exposed Catholics both to the Protestantizing, i.e. private judgment (p.18), and, later, the pluralizing effects of being more fully integrated into the non-Catholic world. Finally, and most importantly for Professor Carlin (p.106), were the effects of the cataclysmic, antinomian, and overtly secularist cultural revolution initiated in the mid-1960s. This cultural upheaval swept over the Catholic institution and an American Catholic population trying, just at that particular moment in time and space, to adjust to new coordinates on the intersecting maps of Church and society. The result of the confluence of these three forces led to the severely weakened and compromised situation in which the Catholic Church finds herself in contemporary American life. In Professor Carlin's own words:

Given the(se) . . . three factors . . . Vatican II, the end of the Catholic 'ghetto,' and the American cultural revolution that began in the mid-1960s—it is plain that Catholics were emerging from the Trent era and becoming full participants in American mainstream culture at precisely the moment when the culture was being revolutionized by a generalized rebellion against authority. The convergence of all three factors was a piece of great historical bad luck for the Catholic Church of the United States. It meant that American Catholicism was bound to undergo a sudden and rapid upheaval (p.105).

This upheaval not only resulted in many simply leaving the Catholic faith. Much more serious is his argument that the majority of those who have stayed in the Church have accepted a tepid and inauthentic religious stance as “generic” or liberal Christians. This “denominational mentality” (p.166) is one in which the religious individual accepts the designation as merely being a member of a “denomination,” just one of many mainstream denominations and other functional equivalents of religion, all making and implicitly being granted, an equal claim to truth and respect. Put another way, Professor Carlin argues that too many in the contemporary Catholic Church of the United States, leaders included, have taken on the death wish of liberal religiosity in granting legitimacy to the idea and practice of religious and moral relativism and to what he calls the “personal liberty principle” (p. 222) which can lead down the road a bit to the acceptance of overt secularism or, even perhaps, to its logical extreme endpoint, nihilism.

Regarding the Catholic Church’s small chances of recovery in the United States, Professor Carlin suggests four steps. The first is officially to denounce and discourage the continued legitimacy of the “denominational mentality” (p. 321). The second is to “re-Catholicize Catholic colleges” (p.322). The third is to “get the Catholic census right” (p.326), by identifying the more or less authentic Catholicism of perhaps 25 million Catholic Americans from the inauthentic version of America’s remaining 40 to 45 million nominal Catholics of varying types. Furthermore, Church leadership should rely or “tend to its base” (p. 331) in its attempt to rebuild the Church in this country. Finally, for Professor Carlin, “...the most important step of all, if American Catholicism is to recover and revive, is to designate contemporary secularism as the ‘official enemy’ of contemporary Catholicism” (p. 335). Given that “organizations are defined negatively as well as positively” (p. 335), the author is suggesting that the contemporary Church follow, in essence, the same type of strategy he saw employed (eventually) by the Church in the wake of the Protestant Reformation, only now substituting “secularism” for “Protestantism” as the force that must be defined in fundamental opposition to the Catholic faith. The Catholic counter-Reformation, for Professor Carlin, consciously constructed a non or anti-Protestant identity which produced “a Catholic rally . . . (which represented) . . . one of history’s great institutional comebacks” (p. 339). Perhaps Catholicism, so the logic goes, might once again rally, this time against the unofficial but dominant religion in the United States.

A Few Questions at the Margins

Both Professor Carlin's analysis and policy suggestions are fundamentally sound and, as this reviewer sees it, beyond intellectual dispute. However, I would respectfully like to raise a few questions and make a few observations at the margins of both his analysis and policy suggestions.

Regarding his analysis of the decline of the Catholic Church in America, it is clear that the three significant causes that he invokes, i.e., Vatican II, the "de-ghettoizing" and upward socio-economic mobility of Catholic Americans, and the American cultural revolution, all interactively were involved in greatly weakening the institution and authenticity of the Catholic belief and practice on the part of the majority of American Catholics. Since he has accurately and in a basic sense described what happened and why, any criticism of his analysis runs the risk of being considered unrealistic and utopian. Having admitted this, let me suggest that Professor Carlin does not engage in any potentially useful speculation about whether or not there could have been *intervening* forces in the form of possible human action that could have lessened significantly the admittedly disastrous outcome brought on by the broader social factors that he analyzes. Put another way, could the ruin we see all around us today have been mitigated in part through the faithful and intelligent responses of episcopal authority, Catholic intellectuals, and new lay initiatives? If this didn't happen, and for the most part, it didn't, the question is why? Such speculation is useful not only in answering the intellectual question of "what might have been," but also in reviewing the assessment of "where the Church is now," and "what are its immediate future prospects?"

Let's start with the issue of the impact of the Second Vatican Council. For the most part, Professor Carlin argues that Vatican II "had a great transforming effect on American Catholicism... not so much because of particular changes introduced by the council, but by virtue of the fact that any changes were made at all" (p. 26). Many other respected scholars have made this argument, and no doubt, there is truth in the claim. Whether correctly or not, however, others have stressed the negative consequences for the faith of a conscious *misinterpretation* of the Council to the effect that it endorsed a religiously heterodox progressivist version of the faith that, practically speaking, merged Catholicism into either a generic liberal Protestantism or slightly more inclusive American Civil Religion. While toward the end of his volume, Professor Carlin does mention the theological mischief caused by what he calls the "extreme modernizers" acting in the name of some nonliteral "Spirit of the Council" (p. 346), he does not suggest why such

an erroneous interpretation was allowed, by official authorities, to be institutionalized throughout Catholic America. What difference, I ask, might it have made if instead, an orthodox definition of the Council had been accepted and promoted by the Bishops?

To his credit, Professor Carlin does recognize the “appallingly poor level of episcopal leadership in the past generation” (p. 309). As he follows:

The bishops who were paralyzed when it came to homosexuality and criminal sexual abuse among the priests of their dioceses were the same bishops who did not know what to make of the rapid rise of secularism and moral liberalism in American society; who were unable to insist that their parish priests sermonize frequently and earnestly about the sexual sins of cohabitation, contraception, and homosexuality and about the homicidal sins of abortion and euthanasia; who were unable to do anything much in the way of mobilizing their Catholic people to put up a political resistance to the abortion movement, the homosexual movement, and the euthanasia movement (the ‘unholy trinity’ of American moral liberalism); who were unable to take any significant action against Catholic elected officials who strongly supported legal abortion (p. 314).

But *why* were the Bishops “paralyzed” and “unable?” Professor Carlin stops short of acknowledging that the problem in the episcopate from the mid-1960s through the 1990s is deeper than a mere lack of imagination, courage, and skill and includes, at least in more than a few cases, outright dissent from the Magisterial teachings and practices of the Church. Is Professor Carlin too generous in his judgements that “Bishops are normally thoroughly orthodox themselves” (p. 270), that “only proven priests are made Bishops” (p. 271), and that “if unorthodox priests are a danger, the governing structure of the Catholic Church provides for containment of this danger. Priests work under the superintendence of bishops, who have the hiring and firing power” (p. 269)? Put another way, the mental experiment is this: could Professor Carlin’s “perfect storm” (p.25) that overturned the Church have been, relatively speaking, better navigated by an episcopacy led, for instance, by leaders in the mold of such contemporaries as Archbishops Chaput, Myers, and Burke than by the actual historical figures of Cardinals Dearden and Bernardin? Relatedly, what was the impact on the then-prevalent interpretation of

the theology of Vatican II by the so-called “Jadot” appointments to the United States during the reign of Paul VI?

Let’s move on to Professor Carlin’s second component of the “perfect storm,” i.e., the “de-ghettoizing” and upward socio-economic mobility of American Catholics. As Professor Carlin puts it:

Catholicism had become middle-class, they had moved to the suburbs; they were sending their kids to college. In short, except for religion, they were just like everyone else; they had become fully Americanized (p. 51).

Professor Carlin usefully sociologically analyzes this move as one from what he terms a “semi-closed” religion (p.37) to one that is relatively speaking, more open to non-Catholic influences. But the question I bring up here is fundamental: assuming that the post-1960s environment wasn’t totally devoid of a significant Catholic presence—and it wasn’t, as the Church brought her institutions to the suburbs—why couldn’t the majority of Catholics have maintained their religion while at the same time more fully participating in American public life? Where were the contemporary intellectuals in the mold of an Orestes Brownson who could have articulated a way of “being American, but in an authentically Catholic way?” Could not a “semi-open” (as compared to an “anything goes”) Catholicism have worked if Catholic leadership had produced a well-catechized and religiously literate flock? Using a sociological term that I have borrowed from Peter L. Berger, isn’t it possible for Catholicism to thrive in a pluralistic context if the Church is able to maintain an intact and functioning “plausibility structure?”

Another related issue to be broached is how Professor Carlin implicitly answers the question, “what constitutes being an American?” If sociological analysts like James D. Hunter argue that our country is presently, more or less, evenly divided between what he terms the religiously oriented “orthodox” and the secular-leaning “progressives,” why concede the definition to the latter? On September 11, 2001 who was more “American,” those ethnically Catholic firemen and cops who went into the twin towers of the World Trade Center in their rescue attempts or the politically correct college professors spouting their left-wing ideas to students from their chairs on that fatal day? Writing in the late 1950s, didn’t Paul Blanshard fear that Catholics were moving on and up into the centers of American life and would, in the process, co-opt the very meaning of Americanness? His fears were Catholic hopes and perhaps could have become a Catholic reality. In any event, the question posed here is to what degree de-ghettoization and upward socio-economic mobility necessarily entail secularization.

The final and most important component of Professor Carlin's "perfect storm" was the 1960s cultural revolution, with roots, as he argues persuasively, in the pre-1960s intellectual movements advocating "cultural relativism" (p. 75ff), "ethical emotivism" (p. 83ff), and an extreme "anti-authoritarianism" (p. 93ff). As Professor Carlin declares, "if we are looking for a handy phrase to sum up the American cultural revolution of the '60s and early '70s, we can probably do no better than this: *a generalized rebellion against authority*" (italics in original, p. 67). He follows, a little bit later, that "in the eyes of vast numbers of young people—and those the most vocal, the most active, and the most influential among them—moral legitimacy had shifted from the constituted authorities to the rebels themselves. This was the volatile culture that greeted an unsuspecting and unprepared Church at its most vulnerable moment, the moment it let down its Tridentine guard" (p. 71).

As someone trained in the sociological tradition of scholars like Emile Durkheim and Pitirim Sorokin who view the individual as constitutively a "cultural creature" subject to the ongoing forces of "socialization," I accept Professor Carlin's understanding that such a pervasive and powerful secular cultural revolution would necessarily have negative effects and weaken both the Church institution and the authenticity of the religious thought and behavior of the American Catholic population, *at least to some degree*. The questions that I raise, again, are at the margins of Professor Carlin's analysis.

The first, again, is "where were the Catholic intellectuals and religious leaders who could have exposed or at least seriously challenged the assumptions and arguments put forth by the secular cultural revolution?" And couldn't it be reasonably expected that such an intellectual intervention would have mitigated, at least somewhat, the negative effects of the revolution? Secondly, it seems as if Professor Carlin comes close to "reifying" the secular encroachment into American civilization. On the one hand, Professor Carlin understands that:

...in the past thirty years or so, we have had skyrocketing rates of sexually transmitted diseases (including AIDS); we have had an epidemic of out-of-wedlock births; we have had phenomenally high divorce rates; we have had millions of children growing up in impoverished single-parent households; we have had tens of millions of abortions; and we have had a pornography explosion in print and film compounded by an even larger secondary explosion of Internet pornography—and all of this with no end in sight (p. 290).

Yet Professor Carlin seemingly doesn't allow for the possibility that the secular worldview and lifestyle carries within it the seeds of its own destruction. Put another way, and paraphrasing Marx, I would argue that the "internal contradictions" of secularism will go a long way in setting the stage for a backlash that could lead to a civilization once again accepting of the natural law. As Professor Carlin candidly states, "my pessimistic conclusions in this book are based on the assumption that certain current social and cultural trends will continue. But maybe they will not" (p. 320). Admittedly complex and ambiguous indications suggest that, maybe, these social and cultural trends will *not* continue. William Strauss and Neil Howe have recently studied what they call the "rising millennials," i.e., young Americans, born since 1982, who are becoming "aggressively normal" in their social and personal preferences. Relatedly, there is also Colleen Carroll's new book explaining why a not insignificant segment of contemporary young adults are now embracing Christian orthodoxy.

Of course neither of these trends, if indeed they prove to be real and lasting, will rebound to the benefit of the Catholic Church if she doesn't get her house quickly back in order. Regarding the issue of restoring the Church, I heartily endorse all of Professor Carlin's previously mentioned policy suggestions. Given my belief, however, that Professor Carlin is correct about "the appallingly poor level of episcopal leadership" (p. 309) and my own belief that a complete critique of episcopal leadership goes beyond ineptitude to, in some cases, religious dissent, I would additionally suggest that John Paul II appoint a papal legate to do whatever needs to be done to right the leadership at the helm of the Catholic ship and put the Church in a position to take advantage of the self-destructive tendencies of secularism for purposes of the evangelization and re-evangelization of the faith in the United States.

Conclusion

Nothing in my review should be construed as constituting a major criticism of *The Decline and Fall of the Catholic Church in America*. Professor Carlin's book represents a major scholarly and social policy contribution to Catholic studies. Buy it, read it, and use it in the classroom, in the local Church discussion group, and in the community public library forum. It will serve as a major catalyst for learning and debate about the Catholic Church in the United States for years to come.