

BIBLICAL CHRISTIANITY AS A CATEGORY

In 19TH CENTURY AMERICAN APOLOGETICS

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J. Gordon Melton, in the *Encyclopedia of American Religions*, classifies Christian churches and American religions into families. He distinguishes between liturgical Christian, among which are the Roman and Old Catholic churches, and the Anglican, Presbyterian, Methodist, Holiness, Pentecostal Families. He thereby categorizes churches, chiefly by genealogy, in a quiet and objective way, promoting the sort of descriptive scholarship for which he is justly famous. Some might think that the distinctions are the result of observation of superficialities. I don't think so. The device is helpful not only in organizing a reference work but in challenging the reader to distinguish the lilies and the daffodils in the American Christian meadow. For the purposes of this paper, I propose the term biblical Christianity to hold together the plethora of American denominations that made up the Evangelical Alliance of the 19th century, including groups as disparate as Presbyterians, Methodists and the Restorationists, as well the fundamentalist and evangelical movements of the 20th, and I will contrast it with Melton's "Liturgical Christianity." It seems to me evident that Roman and eastern Orthodox churches, including Roman schismatic groups from Old Catholic to Lefebvrist,¹ belong among the liturgical churches, and I might throw in the Anglican family and those Lutheran groups who would agree to it.²

¹ A. F. Allison, "Old Catholics," *The New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 1st ed. (NY: McGraw-Hill, 1967) X: 672-673. See also William D. Dinges, "Catholic Fundamentalism" in W. Shea, ed., *The Struggle over the Past: Fundamentalism in the Modern World*. The Annual Publication of the College Theology Society, vol. 35 (Lanham MD: University Press of America, 1993), 255-280.

² It is difficult to locate mystical Christian groups such as Quakers (what happens to Christianity when you don't need a Bible?) and hybrid originalities such as Mormons (what happens to Christianity when you have two Bibles?). As desserts to the main course, to his families Melton adds categories to cover the lot, among them metaphysical, mystical, magickal (sic), and Gnostic families, where he is able to place New Thought groups, homosexual groups, and so fourth. See J. Gordon Melton, ed., *The Encyclopedia of American Religions*, v. I

A different question, one which Melton anticipated, is: can you have a Christianity which is only one of the two, biblical or liturgical? Surely, an objector might say, by drawing this distinction you distort the field from the outset. An anthropologist might answer that purity in this case is absurdity. While there are religions without a book, there is no such thing as a religion, never mind a Christianity, which is non-liturgical or a-liturgical, or at least ritual. And what would a Christianity be like were it unrelated to the Bible? The biblical story, and so the Bible, are essential to Christianity in any form. No form of Christian church is without worship and so without liturgy however muted, and so the Quakers observe a liturgy of prayerful communion . Melton is recommending a descriptive scale here and does not enter issues of normativity, but surely both bible and liturgy are normative for Christianity.

In the description, however, there is no doubt at all that there are biblical and liturgical churches on a sliding scale. Every Sunday morning at 11 AM the people of God walk up the steps of Tower Grove Baptist Church in the Shaw neighborhood of St. Louis with Bible in hand and sit for the forty minute sermon turning the onion leaf pages to check on the minister. Don't tell me that isn't liturgy. At 10 AM, just a few blocks away, Fr. Kenneth Brown at St. Margaret of Scotland "hysops" the people of God with holy water, and nary one drop falls upon the open pages of a parishioner's Bible; don't tell me that "hyspopping" isn't biblical.

(Tarrytown NY: Triumph Books, 1991)

At this point I merely want to make it clear that the charge that the Catholic Church isn't biblical and the counter-charge that evangelicals aren't liturgical and sacramental in fact means that neither is enough of what it should be in the eyes of the other. Surely these Christian communities are both biblical and liturgical. At the same time there really is some value to the distinction, and Melton's and my distinctions hold in some sense. The Catholic Church is liturgical in some sense that the Presbyterian Church isn't, and the Baptists are biblical in some sense that the Catholics aren't. None of those senses should prove difficult to specify.

There is another terminological distinction that plays into evangelical-Catholic relations, that is, between Catholicity and Christianity. For most of the five hundred years of the protest movement against the Catholic Church, evangelical Christians have been quite sure that the Catholic Church is not Christian. This, of course, is closely related in evangelical polemics to the charge that the Catholic Church isn't biblical, but more is at stake than whether you carry your Bible under your arm or in a procession, or have Bible study groups. A negative answer to the question, is the Catholic Church Christian?, is the only answer that justifies the schism of the sixteenth century. In other words there would be no biblical Christianity as a term of distinction had the Catholic Church been a Christian church to begin with. Brother Martin would have died peacefully in his monastery bed had the Catholic Church professed real, that is, biblical Christianity. But it did not, in his view, and so we have Protestants. The conviction that the Roman Catholic Church is not Christian and not biblical would seem to be the very heartbeat of the Reformation, and it is no surprise that it continues to beat among evangelical Christians to this day.

On the other hand, only on a positive answer to the question, is the Catholic Church Christian?, does the Tridentine church possess legitimacy. Since the sixteenth century the Catholic Church has been intent on reuniting Christians based on proof that the Catholic Church is indeed Christian in its faith and practice, and just as intent on proving that the churches of the Reformation aren't Christian or

are only partly Christian. It is clear that some Catholics still think this, not least Cardinal Ratzinger and His Holiness.³ Yet the scene grows more complex for each side. Evangelicals recognize the biblical character of much of Catholic belief and practice, and find themselves hand and glove with Catholics in the struggle for a Christian imprint on American culture, and Catholics recognize undeniable elements of the true church in evangelical communities.⁴

These days the argument may seem boring and stupid. After all, isn't this just another case of Esau and Jacob at the Jabbok, brothers on the verge of making up an old quarrel? Get over it, we may be tempted to say! But to a person like me, to whom the tension of the argument is much more a sign of life than is a surrender to brotherly love and reconciliation (with Karl von Clausewitz,

³ *Dominus Jesus*. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, with the approval of Pope John Paul II (August 6, 2000) published by the United States Catholic Conference, September 6, 2000. One does not have to torture the text to find it saying: They may be Christian, but not enough, and they won't be till they become Roman Catholics. [www.nccbuscc.org/pope/doctrineoffaith.htm].

⁴For a discussion of the ironies of this mutual rejection, see W. Shea, *The Lion and the Lamb: Evangelicals and Catholics in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004)

ecclesiastical peace is only temporary break from the normal state of schism and inquisition), the old Protestant argument needs revisiting. There is something to be gained if the polemic is read carefully especially as the Holy See revives an Integralist view of the church.

The Reformers and their 19th century progeny may be close to the truth in their answer to the question, Is the Catholic Church Christian?, than Catholics would be inclined to admit. In fact, if one accepts -- a big IF for most of us, I assume -- the evangelical definition of Christian faith as Christocentric, bibliocentric, proclamatory (kerygmatic), missionary-conversionist, exclusivist, blood-sacrificial, and apocalyptic, I for one Catholic would not regard myself as Christian and would happily cede the term to evangelicals. By temperament I stand with the Grand Inquisitor, as has the Roman church: order and submissive piety over chaos and gospel freedom. But I am loath to cede the title Christian to evangelicals and remain convinced that the Catholic mode of use of the bible is substantially correct, and I would want to revisit the Catholic claim to Christianity and review the evidence for it.

So the terms evangelical and Catholic do differ, they do at least mark quite different Christianities, and the stark difference raises the issue whether they are or can both be Christian or is it possible that the Protestants, most of them then and many of them still, are correct when they argue that we have here two religions as different from one another as Christianity is from Judaism? I realize that in this age and for most of us this proposal appears facetious, or even manipulative, but I ask you to exercise some Christian patience. I am confessing at least an ambivalent state of mind on this very important question. Perhaps I could put it this way: I am quite sure that I am a Catholic but I am far from sure that I am or want to be a Christian, and so when I turn to the Catholic Church I am inclined to downplay those elements of it which are putatively biblical and to emphasize those elements which might be construed as tangential to biblical Christianity as it is construed by

evangelicals. When I turn to evangelicals I find their conception of Christianity quite unbiblical, ahistorical, fanciful, and ecclesially irresponsible (as any good Catholic would!).

Finally I want to distinguish American evangelical Protestantism from American Nativism. Though the inventors, leaders and supporters of the nativist movement of the 19th century were evangelical Protestants whose spirits were bonded to theological and religious anti-Catholicism, Nativism is a political movement in the ante-bellum period of those who, once through the gates, wished to close the gates to further immigration. The nativists had a social, political, economic and even a cultural case to make against the immigrants who happened to be Catholics, while the evangelicals had in addition a theological and religious case to make against the Catholic Church and would have made it were there no immigrants at all. The Anglo-Saxon racists among the 19th century nativists would not have swarmed had the immigrants been from Sweden and the Shetland Islands. The evangelicals among them most certainly would not have bestirred themselves had those immigrants been Protestants, for their objection to immigration was quite clearly motivated by theological judgments about and religious fear of the Catholic Church rather than economic worries. In fact, for Samuel F. B. Morse and Lyman Beecher, had the immigrants been clean, healthy, sober yet still Catholic, worry would have been greater still.

Our history has shown that you didn't have to be an evangelical to be a nativist, though it helped. Paul Blanshard, the chief 20th century American literary antagonist of the Catholic Church, was a social, political and cultural nativist who was profoundly bothered by the Catholic presence (the great immigration was well over by his time) in the United States, but he didn't have a tatter, not a jot or a tittle, of evangelical faith left in him by the time he published *American Freedom and Catholic Power*.⁵ If one needs a further sign of the applicability of the distinction between

⁵ Paul Blanshard, *American Freedom and Catholic Power*. 2nd edition. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958.1949). See *Personal and Controversial: An Autobiography by Paul Blanshard*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973); and his account of his stay in Rome during Vatican II, *Paul Blanshard on Vatican II* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966). He is the paragon of high-culture, liberal

evangelical and nativist anti-Catholicism, and the wonderful mutability of Nativism, recall that the chief nativist of our own American moment is Pat Buchanan, a devout Roman Catholic who protests against putatively Catholic immigrants.

I don't think there is much to Nativism intellectually -- in fact, it offends me -- but religious and theological anti-Catholicism is another conceptual animal, and there is something to be said for it. Historically speaking any reasonably Enlightened person, Protestant or not, including many Catholics, might well be anti-Catholic. And this anti-Catholicism has proven to be just as dangerous as Nativism. For example, for all its overtones of social and economic motivation, the convent burning in Charlestown in 1834, the starting flag for 19th century Nativism, was primarily an act of religious hatred.⁶ But our issue is not Nativism. In the first place, then, what is biblical Christianity? Secondly, how American Catholics have responded to the hard judgment that they do not belong to a biblical church. In what sense, then, do Catholics think they are in fact a biblical and so a Christian church?⁷

anti-Catholics.

⁶ Nancy Lusignan Schultz, *Fire and Roses: The Burning of the Charlestown Convent, 1834* (NY: The Free Press, 2000).

⁷ All churches under question, Catholic as well as Protestant, are much more concerned with their own practice of Christian faith than they are with polemic against other churches. Tribes spend their energy living, not in hating other tribes, except when they are at war. Even then anti-Catholic literature is meant for Protestants and Catholic anti-evangelicalism is meant for Catholic consumption, but neither is close to the first line of importance for either community. Nonetheless, the charges and countercharges are ubiquitous in the history of evangelical-Catholic relations for five centuries, and the literature is enormous. Why in the American case should Protestants be so concerned with Catholicism? See Jenny Franchot, *Roads to Rome: the Antebellum Protestant Encounter with Catholicism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994). In these outbursts something was going on of import for American Protestants, though it had very little to do with Catholics themselves. Rather, according to Franchot, there was a crisis in Protestant self-understanding. In addition, one must regard the literature as a signal of a profound rift in American culture, perhaps as deep as the American

The Functions of the Bible

Biblical Christianity, according to its evangelical practitioners, is in the first instance the faith and practice described in the Bible. In the second, Christianity is the religion gathered round the Bible, the church that prays and thinks and writes under the inspiration of the Bible and is ruled by the Bible. Like our own American Constitution, the Bible is at once a text and focal symbol, what John Randall, the naturalist philosopher, would call a conjunction as well as a noun. The Bible isn't a book only, it describes and implies and, indeed, prescribes a way of life for a people. One might say that in the 16th century Divine Providence devised a strategy for meeting the rising culture of modernity, a portable Word of God addressed to each believer, like a personal letter, making it possible for each person to find divine instruction for a way of life without the need of a guiding community.⁸

But further: the Bible provides the only rule for Christian faith and practice. The church itself is not a rule; the church is ruled. The primacy of the Bible negates the primacy and separate status of any other canon including the church fathers, councils, creeds, and ecclesial authorities, practices and doctrines. Any other authority, any other rule, is unauthentic unless it is grounded in the Bible. As Alexander Campbell put it in his debate with Bishop Purcell, "Divine authority cannot exist, but in the holy oracles; against any other pretended infallible standard, all men should protest."⁹ A creed,

racial divide and as wide as the economic divide.

⁸ Of course persons coalesced and communities of faith and worship were born.

⁹ *A Debate on the Roman Catholic Religion between Alexander Campbell, Bethany, Va. And Right Reverend John B. Purcell, Bishop of Cincinnati Held in the Sycamore Street Meetinghouse, Cincinnati, from the 13th to the 21st of January, 1837. Taken Down by Reporters, and revised by the parties* (Nashville, Tenn.: McQuiddy Printing Co., 1914. 1837), 124.

then, is binding not because a church has agreed upon it and used it as a test, or because the saints who have gone before us vouch for it, but only insofar as it is biblical doctrine.

In the especially intense forms of evangelical Christianity the Bible is also the limit to belief and practice. Immigrants from Ireland, Thomas Campbell and his son Alexander aimed their Restoration Movement at shaping a Christian community life that was purely biblical and that cut across evangelical denominationalism, and so to be weighed down by no ecclesiastical tradition whatsoever: “Where the Scriptures speak we speak, “ they intoned, and “where the Scriptures are silent we are silent.” Impossible to live by, of course, and the endlessly talkative Campbells were the first to violate their own rule. In fact, the Campbells took the meaning of biblical Christianity to its logical next step and made of the Bible a blue print for the Christian church, insisting that no historical accretion or expansion of the structure of the church and its beliefs beyond the description of it in the New Testament texts be credited. Should the church have music? Not a biblical church! Should there be a creed? Never! “No creed but Christ!” and “No book but the Bible!” Should there be a central judicature deciding matters of belief? There is none in the Bible.¹⁰

Moreover, for biblical Christianity the Bible provides a table of contents for doctrine, and doctrine is little more than the restatement of biblical texts. Its theology, in turn, does no more than excavate the doctrines and connect the dots. The Bible, as nineteenth century Americans repeated, has a “system” and theology’s job is to reproduce it. In addition to the contents of the church’s belief, the Bible delivers the table of contents for the anti-Catholic tract, for the Catholic Church is constituted

¹⁰ Rarely has the mirage of a tradition-less biblical church been so well articulated and so avidly pursued. See Richard Hughes, ed., *The American Quest for the Primitive Church* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1988).

by non-biblical and anti-biblical teaching and practice, as can be easily determined by comparing its “system” to the system of the Bible.¹¹

The Bible is as well the storehouse of divinely inspired images of, even codes for, the distortions of the Roman church. You can find in it not merely correct doctrines but descriptions of the horrors which have been and the horrors yet to come, the chief satanic instrument of which is the Roman Catholic church. The Bible teaches not only what Christianity is but what it isn't, and, when a church isn't what it should be, that church may turn out to be a mirror-reverse image of Christianity.

¹¹ They seem to have meant by system a logically coherent set of ideas which can be expressed in propositions. Connecting the dots is a large project. Charles Hodge, the most impressive American Presbyterian theologian of the 19th century, both explained the project and exemplifies the way the facts of the Bible become a system. See his *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Wm. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995.1873) See also Mark Reynolds, “Charles Hodge’s Ecclesiastical Elenctics: His Response to Catholicizing Tendencies in the Churches, 1837-1860.” Ph.D. dissertation, Saint Louis University, 2000. Reynolds explains a great deal of Hodge’s complex and “surprising” assessment of Roman Catholicism.

As the bible displays the light of God and darkness of Satan, as the anti-Christ is the reverse Christ, so the Bible displays the true and the false church.

But for biblical Christians the Bible is first and foremost the book of God, the book where God and Christ and salvation are found, and only secondarily a source book for anti-Catholic polemic. The bible in its most important sense is the house of God where the saints dwell, and the estranged are welcomed and instructed and sanctified and comforted.¹² Together the converted practice biblical Christianity. The Bible did instruct people on the Catholic Church, but the constructive uses remain. Primarily the Bible fed and feeds faith and hope among those who also happen, justifiably perhaps, to fear Catholicism.

The Bible, then, sets forth the church's faith and practice, and in doing so defines what a Christian church is. Belief and practices not based on biblical teaching are illegitimate. They must be there in the text or at least not logically opposed to what is there in the text. An important factor in determining what really is in the text is the hermeneutical habit induced by Luther's favoring of Romans and Galatians. The habit of establishing a canon within the canon continues among American evangelicals, with Romans and Galatians used as a goad to Catholicism to this day. But each of the evangelical traditions has its additional cap-pistols within the canon, and over them they

¹² Samuel S. Hill, "The Spirit of American Fundamentalism" and Bernard Ramm, "The Ethos of the Fundamentalist Movement" in William M. Shea, ed., *The Struggle Over the Past*, 209-222.

divide among themselves, Pentecostals, for example, dividing from Reformed, or the Campbellites dividing from Baptists, Methodists and Presbyterians. And so tradition has an application to evangelicals, at least in the sense that although the entire biblical text is Spirit-breathed, some parts are breathed more fragrantly than others. But, still, even when tradition is reluctantly allowed a role, the Bible precedes the church and the interpreter. It is no construct, it is a datum.

In practice Catholics, too, establish more and less important texts, and are every bit as likely as evangelicals to use one text to balance and even to counter others in order to support whatever it is they do and believe. Catholics pounced upon Matthew 16 and John 21 to find support for the papacy. But they had and have the advantage of a reified hermeneutical habit and call it the *magisterium*, the power by which the church teaches and interprets the Scriptures correctly. For them, too, the whole Bible is the Word of God and is fit for use as the leaders of the church choose to use it. Their canon is not within the canon, but the magisterium is used much to the same effect as the evangelicals' rule of salvation by faith and grace alone. Under that rule Catholics mine the meaning of the Scriptures and divide true from false Christianity.

Let us take a case for contrast, namely, the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and the Roman church on the ordination of Women. As sad as it makes the small evangelical church, itself a break away from the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. in 1936, it must "terminate our existing Ecclesiastical Fellowship as of July 1, 1997" with the Christian Reformed Church, because the Christian Reformed decided to "certify certain women as candidates for ministry...."¹³ What is at stake for the OPC is the rule of the Bible: the CRC Synod had "opened the special offices of elder, minister, and evangelist" to persons biblically prohibited from holding them. The inviolability of the passage is particularly

¹³ Letter from Donald D. Duff, Stated Clerk of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church General Assembly, Willow Grove PA to Dr. David H. Engelhard, General Secretary of the Synod of the Christian Reformed Church in North America, June 10, 1997.

incisive. God, through the biblical author, declares, “I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over the man.” [I Tim. 2:12]. The CRC cannot do what is clearly prohibited by St. Paul and God.

In the Catholic counterpart, *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, Apostolic Letter reiterating the Catholic Church’s prohibition of the ordination of women to the priesthood,¹⁴ the Congregation and the Pope ignore the only biblical text which explicitly supports their position by forbidding women to hold authority over men and to speak in church assemblies.(I Tim., 2:11-15) Even though they do cite the epistles to Timothy and the first to Corinth to other effect in the very Apostolic Letter, they argue instead from the “unbroken teaching and practice” of the church east and west to the same position taken by the OPC, that is, that the Catholic Church cannot ordain women without being unfaithful to its apostolic heritage. When the OPC decided to stick with Paul and God, and when the Roman church decided to stick with its unbroken tradition and to pass over the biblical text without comment, we get to the heart of the matter of what biblical Christianity is. *Quod Deus scripsit, scripsit!*, say the biblical Christians. *Quod ecclesia docuit, docuit!*, say the liturgical Christians. For the latter the *vox ecclesiae* is the *vox dei*. For evangelicals there is only one *vox dei* that is the *vox sacrae paginae*.

¹⁴ John Paul II, *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, issued May 30, 1994, in *Origins* (June 9, 1994) 24/4.

If, according to evangelicals, the Catholic Church is not a Christian church, what is it and how did it get to be what it is? The popular and pseudo-scholarly answer is that the post-apostolic Christian churches, leavened by the leadership of Rome, abandoned their biblical Christianity in a long series of compromises of belief and practice. The outcome was the Roman Catholic Church, a melding of paganism and Judaism under a patina of biblical Christianity.¹⁵ The decisive political event in this sad history of declension was the domestication of the church by the emperors Constantine and Theodosius (312-380).¹⁶ The government of the church afterward followed the imperial model, with the bishop of Rome claiming the authority of Peter, the Levitical priesthood revived, and the governance of local churches was entrusted to the *pontifices*, who claimed succession from the Twelve but in fact sat on the chairs of imperial governors. The *pontifex maximus* in its original exercise, as the *New Catholic Encyclopedia* itself points out, presided over “the members of the council of priests forming the pontifical college, which ranked as the highest priestly organization at [pagan] Rome.”¹⁷ The bishop of Rome, in other words, far from being the successor of Peter, is in

¹⁵ The story is told in great detail by W. J. Wilkins, *Paganism in the Papal Church* (London: Swan, Sonnenschein and Co., 1901) and by Alexander Hyslop in *The Two Babylons, or The Papal Worship Proved to be the Worship of Nimrod and His Wife, with sixty-one woodcut illustration from Nineveh, Babylon, Egypt, Pompeii, etc.* (London: A. & C. Black, 1932. 1916). Bits and pieces of the story, likely inherited from the Centuriators of Magdeburg, are omnipresent in the popular as well as the more sophisticated literature. A compression of Hyslop is available in Ralph Woodrow, *Babylonian Mystery Religion* (Riverside, CA: Ralph Woodrow Evangelistic Association, Inc., 1966). The story informs the most influential evangelical 20th century theological critique of the Catholic Church, Loraine Boettner’s *Roman Catholicism* (Phillipsburg NJ: The Presbyterian and Reformed Church, 1962). One might speculate that the Reformation tactic of branding Catholicism as a form of *pagano-papismus* and condemning it for adopting the practices of Judaism influenced the development of the comparative study of religions, as does S. J. Barnett in *Idol Temples and Crafty Priests: The Origins of Enlightenment Anticlericalism* (London: Macmillan Ltd., 1999), 108-109.

¹⁶ This was not the only or the first step toward compromise. See the list and commentary in Boettner, 7-10 where he concludes that much of Catholicism is “taken directly from paganism or from Old Testament Judaism. Some scholars say that as much as 75 percent of the Roman ritual is of pagan origin.”

fact the successor to the imperial Pontifex Maximus, and, according to shifting political circumstances, either the chaplain to the emperor, his companion, or his superior in rule. This universal power was constantly augmented by the succeeding bishops of Rome, most prominently by Leo the Great (440-461) and Gregory the Great (590-604), culminating in the denomination of Boniface III as universal bishop by the emperor Phocas in 606 CE. Acceptance of the title revealed the Beast at the helm, signaled the end of the age, and the countdown to Armageddon could begin.

Nor is the overweening ambition of the papacy the worst subversion. The flood of pagans into the official, public post-Constantinian church led to the imposition of pagan customs and Jewish law on the churches, turning them from the scriptural doctrine of salvation by faith and grace alone to the Roman Catholic doctrine of salvation by works. The sacramental system is akin to an economic machine geared to the support of a clerical caste, a purpose served by the sacrificial systems of Rome and Jerusalem. While biblical Christianity survived here and there under this Satanic mock-Christian church, the public church under Roman influence is in fact no Christian church at all. In the American setting the main Christian churches [Presbyterian, Methodist, Baptist, and Disciples) at various points in the nineteenth century refused to recognize Catholic baptism as a valid New Testament ordinance, being dispensed as it was by a pagan priesthood. Roman baptism was baptism into Roman paganism rather than into the biblical church. It is from this de-Christianizing of the churches by the popes that all the Roman sins against liberty of conscience and all the trafficking between political and religious leaders in the West descend.

William Nevins (1797-1835)

¹⁷ *New Catholic Encyclopedia* 1st ed. XI: 549.

William Nevins graduated Yale (1816) and Princeton Seminary (1819). Ordained in 1820, he shepherded the First Presbyterian Church of Baltimore from then until his death in 1835. He wrote on the Roman Catholic Church for the *New York Observer*, whose ardent supporter was Samuel F. B. Morse and whose first order of business was exposure of the Whore of Babylon. The essays were published posthumously in *Thoughts on Popery* and a sequel.¹⁸ The books hit the bookstalls just as the first wave of Nativism and anti-Catholicism took off,¹⁹ one wing provided by Rebecca Reed and the other by Maria Monk,²⁰ This bird's far more substantial corpus was by Nevins himself.

Although Nevins was not a fine stylist (he's not an Edwards or a Channing), he wrote a readable column in accessible, sometimes even snappy prose. He was smart and well educated. He admitted to being a Calvinist, but he didn't argue on distinctly Calvinist theological principles. The criticism followed the general Reformation appeal to the scriptures on the one hand and opposition to Roman Catholicism, its additions to and departures from Scripture, on the other. Even though his sense of humor and sarcasm are evident at the expense of Catholics, at least he had a sense of humor, in distinction from colleagues and contemporaries, Samuel Morse and Lyman Beecher. The latter

¹⁸ *Thoughts on Popery* (New York: American Tract Society, 1936). William Plumer, the likely editor of *Thoughts*, published "selected Remains" and a *Memoir of William Nevins* in 1836. Nevins' sermons were published in 1837. For a biography of Nevins, see *Appleton's Cyclopaedia of American Biography* (Detroit: Gale Research, 1968; NY: D. Appleton and Co., 1888). Remember that he is writing in the midst of the first great outbreak of anti-popery in the new nation. His work followed upon the Act of Emancipation (1829) passed in the English Parliament and the upswing in British anti-popery attendant upon the Act.

¹⁹ Nevins had *The Christian's Guide to Heaven* at hand throughout the writing of the columns, a popular book of Catholic religious instruction. The imprimatur or nihil obstat was likely given by John Hughes whom Nevins took to be the author.

²⁰ See Rebecca Reed, *Three Months in a Convent, or, The Narrative of Rebecca Theresa Reed* (Boston: Russell and Metcalf, 1835) and Schultze's account of the incident and of Reed in *Fire and Roses*. Maria Monk's oft reprinted, excerpted, and condensed *Awful Disclosures of the Hotel Dieu Nunnery* (Hamden CT: Archon Books, 1962. 1836) was one of the best sellers of the

couldn't bring themselves to poke fun at Catholicism; to Beecher and Morse the Catholic Church was no laughing matter. (None of the three laughed at his own religion, so far as one can tell). But then Nevins didn't think that Catholics were quite the threat Morse and Beecher thought they were. He accepted Morse's Austrian conspiracy theory of the settlement of the mid-West, perhaps because it was Morse's, but Nevins couldn't bring himself to believe that such commonsensical people as the Americans would fall for popery. The unscriptural, unchristian nonsense of the Roman church is his interest, and this very characteristic of Romanism meant the nation was safe since it is solidly biblical.

Let us listen as he responds to the future Catholic bishop John Hughes' impudent characterization of Protestantism as a "new religion" and "Mr. H's" assertion that Catholicism is the "old [i.e., authentic] religion."

Mr. H., the Goliath of Catholics, wants to know first, what the Protestant religion is. He has been often told, but I will tell him again. It is the religion of the Bible. It was not called Protestant when the Bible was written, for there was no corruption to protest against. ...There it is, in the Bible. Read it. Read any part of it. ... Is not that all which Jesus Christ did? He gave the Scriptures to the Jews, and said: “search them.” So we put the Bible in your hand, and say, there is our religion. And yet you ask, “Where was your religion before Luther?” Before Luther! We tell you where it was before the earliest fathers. It was in the Gospels and Epistles, where it is now, and ever will be. ...Did you never hear of a society of Christians residing at Rome...and another respectable society of Christians...who...dwelt in a city called Ephesus. ...Will Mr. H deny that the society of Christians at Ephesus professed and taught the doctrines of the Epistle to the Ephesians? I think not. Well, sir, what are the doctrines of that Epistle? Are they yours or ours, Catholic or Protestant? ... Now I would ask Mr. H. a question. Where was your religion, Mr. H., at the time the Bible was written? I am curious to know. How came the evangelists and apostles to know nothing about it, if it is really the religion of Christ?...I want to know where the Roman Catholic religion was before those good men died; where it was before the fathers? ...They [Catholics] say that [...theirs...] is the first form of Christianity. That is a mistake. It is the second. The first appeared for a while, “then fled into the wilderness, where she had a place prepared of God,” and re-appeared at the Reformation. They call it a new religion. But, no, it is the old restored.²¹

This is a neatly balanced and tightly spun version of the Protestant myth. Alexander Campbell compresses the contrast nicely into one sentence: “The first, and characteristic difference, between the Protestant and the Roman Catholic, is this: the former believes the scriptures first, and the church afterwards; whereas, the latter believes the church first, and the scriptures afterwards.”²²

²¹ Nevins, 30-33.

²² Campbell and Purcell, 323.

The comments Nevins makes on Catholic practices fall firmly within traditional Reformation outrage and sarcasm on matters of Catholic idolatry and superstition. Nevins read a published report by a Catholic priest-missionary sent to the Midwestern United States to the same Austrian Leopold Society the existence of which caused such dyspepsia in the innards of Samuel Morse and Lyman Beecher. Fr. Baraga, the missionary, mentions among other things that he had “promised our heavenly mother that I would consecrate to her the first church I should consecrate among the Indians.” He goes on to offer “thanks to Mary, gracious mother, who ever prays for the conversion of the heathen.” Dr. Nevins reacts: “Now if all this is not idolatry, I wish some body could tell me what idolatry is. I would as soon undertake to defend the worship of the golden calf as this.”²³ Fr. Baraga also asks the Society to send him cups, boxes for the Eucharistic bread, rosaries, crucifixes, church furniture and linen. Nevins comments:

What a puerile religion the Catholic religion is! How childish! How petty its cares! About what trifles it concerns itself! The Christian is truly ‘the highest style of man,’ but the consistent Catholic is not much above the lowest. .No: such things could not be of essential service to [our] missions. We do not understand converting people as the Catholics do. They can regenerate and pardon, and do all the rest in a trice. We have to bring before the mind of the sinner the great-saving truth of Christ crucified; but they have only to put a little crucifix in his hand. I went a short time ago to visit a man under sentence of death, to talk to him about Christ and his death. I found him gazing intently on a little metallic image of Christ crucified, which a priest had left him. He seemed indifferent to all I said. The priest had prepared him. ...There is nothing of which I am more perfectly certain than that the religion of the Church of Rome is not the religion

²³ Nevins, 190-193.

of Jesus Christ. I do not care to say what it is but it is not Christianity. How can they be the same, when they differ so widely? Midnight and noon are not more unlike.²⁴

The issues for Nevins throughout the book are the Bible and gospel. The biblical word versus the image, the biblically shaped mind versus the pagan senses; biblical worship in Spirit and Truth versus idolatry, biblical faith versus superstition. How important are the Word and words for Nevins: that is where salvation is found, and it is shut out by mere images. If I may use an exclamation point myself, what an immensely sad failure to understand on Mr. N's part! In what Catholics in any age would regard as contemplation of the crucified Christ by a soul touched by grace, Nevins sees only idolatry. In Nevins' view the condemned man gazing on the crucifix is the same sort of distorted Incarnationalism as the pilgrim yearning for the pope's blessing or the penitent kneeling for absolution at what Nevins calls the confessional stool. They should, in his view, be reading the bible and kneeling only before "the mercy throne of the great God." Here, as throughout the evangelical polemic against Catholicism, truth is mediated only through the biblical Word and perhaps through words about the biblical Word, never through things or rites involving things.

A Catholic Response

John Purcell (1800-1883) was born in Ireland, immigrated to USA at 18, studied with the Sulpician fathers in their Paris seminary and was ordained a priest in 1827. He then taught at Mount St. Mary's College in Emmitsburg, Maryland and became its president (1829-33), was appointed bishop of Cincinnati in 1833 and died its archbishop in 1883. His half century in the episcopacy saw tremendous growth of his diocese in institutions, religious communities, parishes and schools. He

²⁴ Nevins, 194-196.

had the pleasure of publicly defending Archbishop Gaetano Bedini, the much vilified Vatican ‘spy,’ on his tour of the American Catholic Church. He supported the total abstinence movement, thus proving his fallibility; he sided with the Union and against slavery, thereby displaying his political foresight; he was an “inopportunist” at Vatican I and left before the final vote on infallibility, proving his power of discernment of the Holy Spirit and his Christian courage.

Purcell took up Alexander Campbell’s challenge to an eight day public debate in January, 1837 in what was one of the great and most curious events of the Nativist period. They debated from morning till evening, with a board of moderators and a stenographer, and a lively crowd which had to be silenced when Purcell’s sense of humor stirred it to raucous laughter or when the debaters fell into a distracting fracas, something that occurred often.

In the week-long debate Campbell succeeded in raising the major objections to Roman Catholicism in a forum in which the Catholic participant could hardly duck the charges, and in which the papist’s “Jesuitical” reasoning and inadequate learning would be exposed to the public. Purcell on his side had ample opportunity to spell out Roman Catholic self-understanding and to argue with an outstanding proponent of biblical Christianity in front of a large crowd and, via newspapers, to a national audience. For both men it was an attractive, if risky, stage. Both men for their day on the frontier were well-educated men, both were highly practiced orators and respected champions of their communities. Both carried into the fray three hundred years of Irish venom. The debate was a success and attracted national attention in newspaper and journals. The stenographic accounts were reviewed and approved by the antagonists in short order and published in a single volume that sold well. I cannot say the volume ever once kept me from dinner, for its four hundred and fifty pages are not only daunting in number but also in print size. Nonetheless it is a fascinating capsule of the theological debate between evangelicals and Catholics over five centuries.

In the course of the debate Purcell responded to the pagan-Jewish derivation of popery, of which Campbell made a great deal. The Roman church, Purcell admitted, inherited forms and offices from pagan Rome and Judaism, each of which, however, had its divine revelations. After all, Rome borrowed from the primitive and indistinct revelation to Adam and to the patriarchs, and even from written Law itself. Israel inherited revelations from Adam, from the patriarchs and from Moses. There are plenty of parallels between Catholic and Jewish institutions, rendered intelligible and acceptable by the fact that both are divine in inspiration. For example, the Catholics have a church to guide them where Israel had a synagogue; the Catholic pontiff sprinkles water to cleanse the people and the Jewish pontiff sprinkled blood for the same purpose, and so forth. Thus, he said, Campbell is mistaken when he maintains that revelation is limited to the Bible and that proper Christian practice is limited by the New Testament text.²⁵ It is clear to Purcell that neither is the case.

The argument turned to Scripture. Purcell maintained that biblical Christianity as that is understood by evangelicals is a religion new in the sixteenth century in the Catholic view of things. Biblical Christianity in the proper sense is the Catholic Church as it has made its way through history, reeling but erect, as Chesterton put it. Ironically in the Catholic view of things only a church with a liturgy can hear and understand and apply the biblical revelation. Only a liturgical church can be a biblical church in the proper sense. Biblical Christianity as practiced by evangelicals would be unrecognizable to a member of the early church. Evangelicalism is certainly not biblical in the full sense. It was not Constantine or Leo who gave us the Roman Catholic Church; rather, the Catholic Church has given us the Bible. The church precedes the Bible, he says, agreeing with Campbell's statement of the Catholic position.. Millions had become Christian before the bible was collected

²⁵ Campbell and Purcell, 304-05. Purcell jokingly threatened to show that 666 in fact stood for Alexander Campbell. Hilarity followed, and then the gavel. Campbell challenged him to do so. Purcell asked in which of five languages he would prefer it done.

and determined to be Scripture. Faith came from hearing, not reading.²⁶ We do believe in the church first, he admits:

The bible could not shed its blood to attest to its divine origin...The ignorant, who are a large proportion of the human race, could not read it...Hence, we believe in the church first; and on the faith of the evidences which I have enumerated, we believe in the bible, which the church presents to us, vouching for its purity and authenticity. The bible obtained, sanctions the authority of the church, and confirms our faith. Here, all is consistent, and our submission to the church is reasonable. ...Hence the remarkable saying of St. Augustine: "I should not believe the gospel itself, if the Catholic Church did not oblige me to do so." . . . [The Protestant] must turn Catholic at the very outset, and take the bible as he gets it, on authority, or remain an unbeliever all his life. And he must believe that authority to be infallible, or else he can never be sure that the bible it gives him is divine. Catholics have faith by baptism, as Protestants have; but the latter lose it when they adopt, on arriving at a mature age, the Protestant principle, that every man must find out his religion for himself, from the Bible.²⁷

²⁶ Ibid., 329. Perhaps it would not be entirely inaccurate to say that Protestantism is a Christianity for the literate and Catholicism, for much of its history, a Christianity for the illiterate.

²⁷ Ibid., 329-31.

Purcell's comments, utterly typical of Catholic apologetics, are consonant with the late modern position expressed in Vatican II's *Dei Verbum*. The Fathers of the Council, on the near side of the immense expansion of biblical studies and ready to admit with Campbell that the Bible judges the church, stand firm with Purcell on the locus of authentic and authoritative interpretation of the Bible. For them as for the nineteenth century Catholic apologists it is to the homilist that the scriptures are entrusted in the local assembly, to the bishops whose first task is teaching and preaching the *Verbum*, and to the communion of bishops with the bishop of Rome who have a last word on its meaning. The Catholic answer was every bit as straight-forward as the Protestant critique, and it is, as might be expected, the reverse of the evangelical position. Purcell asserted the priority of the church over the Bible in two senses: (1) without the church there would be no Bible, in its writing, its constitution as a sacred book, in its transmission and its multiple uses (an historical argument to support a theological claim); and (2) the Bible is the book of the church in the sense that the church as a Spirit-led community, as the presence of Christ in the world, is the only fully legitimate interpreter of the Bible (a theological doctrine). In the face of the evangelical claim that Rome thereby asserts control of revelation in Scripture just as it effects the manipulation of grace in the sacraments, Roman theologians and hierarchs boldly asserted that their position is completely consistent with the Scriptures themselves and with church practice since their writing. The Bible in the hands of Catholics even provides a blueprint of Roman monarchy in some detail, with particulars worked out, the blanks filled in as it were, in the course of the church's history. We may suppose, for example, that the Twelve did not wear sacred vestments nor were they celibate. The vaunted Catholic tradition is no more and no less than the ways the Scripture has been interpreted and applied by the divinely guided church throughout its history and up to the present, and especially in the church's liturgical assembly and setting.

In the end the Catholic position is that the Bible isn't the only revelation of God, and that the church has the right and duty to accept other gifts of God where it finds them and when they are found to be compatible with the scriptural revelation. And its second position is that illiterates can be saved as

well as those who can read, but only in a church whose ethos is constituted by the story told in the Bible.

Conclusion

We can return to one of the questions posed at the outset. Are these the same religion? The terminology is much the same, the intellectual and spiritual contexts and usage are different. I mean by context what is implied by the terms liturgical and biblical. Does the common terminology make it one religion or do the contexts establish it as two? Against my dialectical instincts I must say that, though the contrast is often stark, it is not enough to say that they are different religions, but surely enough to say that they are quite different Christianities, surely as different as are, say, Reform and Orthodox Judaisms.²⁸ My temptation is to say that they differ as much as Christianity differs from Judaism, but, no, I stop short of that. According to what once was the near unanimous evangelical position, the Catholic Church is apostate from the Christian (i.e., biblical) churches. According to the universal Catholic position, Protestants fall short of a decent schism; they are simple heretics who still, even in the new millennium and after five hundred years of community life, do not make up a proper Christian church²⁹. Moreover, the situation, once a good bit clearer, has in the past few decades grown increasingly complicated by peculiar hybrids within the respective communities styled Catholic evangelicals and evangelical Catholics, and by the increasing stream of convert exchange between the two, each direction in the flow equally strongly convinced that they go toward a truer and fuller Christian community of discipleship.

²⁸ On the question how Judaisms are to be distinguished, see Jacob Neusner, "Judaism, Definitions of" in *The Encyclopedia of Judaism*, eds. Jacob Neusner, Alan J. Avery-Peck, and William Scott Green (Leiden: Brill, 2000), II: 579-88.

²⁹ *Dominus Jesus*.
Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, 5/29/01.
<http://www.nccbuscc.org/pope/doctrineoffaith.htm>

Throughout the literature, it seems to me, the role of imagination in Christian practice is a significant part of the difference between the two communities although no one pays any explicit attention to its importance. This is especially evident in contrasts of belief and practice such as surround the Virgin, the saints, relics, liturgical practice, hierarchical accouterments, the papacy and its infallibility. Even sympathetic Protestants remain nervous about the profuse and prolific imagination of Catholics and their willingness to skirt idolatry for the sake of concrete presentation of meaning in images in what on the surface seems to be a violation of the Mosaic proscription of the worship of idols. Moreover, the recent display of the corpse of Pope John XXIII in the Vatican is the latest example in an historically prominent Catholic obsession with the death and the dead.³⁰

The deepest part of the argument between the two has to do with the combination of this adventuresome Catholic imagination and Catholic ecclesiological beliefs.³¹ The two ecclesial myths, spun at the time of the Protestant and Catholic reformations, seem, if you will pardon the mixture of metaphors, spoken in concrete. Both of the ecclesial myths are supernaturalist. The evangelical myth contains a good dose of conspiracy theory and is much more apocalyptic and even Zoroastrian in inspiration, while the Catholic myth is mightily powered by the papal drive for control of bishops and their churches.

³⁰ To Protestant on the Grand Tour in the 19th century, Catholic churches appeared stuffed with death, “full of bones and skulls and coffins, repositories of biological decay that seemingly ignored hygienic or moral etiquette.” Protestant romantic nostalgia so nicely met by tombs and memorial plaques in English cathedrals gave way to panic and disgust when confronted with the bone yards of Rome. Franchot, 24.

³¹ Mark Massa, *Anti-Catholicism in America: The Last Acceptable Prejudice* (New York: Crossroad Publishers, 2003). Massa, unlike Jenkins, offers a theory to explain American anti-Catholicism. He draws it from David Tracy's methodological opus, *The Analogical Imagination* (New York: Crossroad Publishers, 1981).

A subtlety noticed toward the end of the Campbell-Purcell debate, in a long quotation from Bishop England's address to Congress in 1826, amounts to the introduction of historical consciousness into the long inflamed historical apologetics of evangelicals and Catholics.³² The cruciality of critical history is recognized by both Purcell and by John England. With its introduction, the hold of ecclesial myth on both parties is significantly weakened. If we may leap from 1837 to the 1980's, and call up Thomas Bokenkotter's *A Concise History of the Catholic Church*³³ with its assessment of the papacy and Mark Noll's "The Eclipse of Old Hostilities between and the Potential for New Strife among Catholics and Protestants since Vatican II,"³⁴ and Noll's more recent study in his *American Evangelical Christianity: An Introduction*,³⁵ we can see that historical investigation has taken firm hold on the expansive and dense ecclesial myths that have for centuries reigned among evangelicals and Catholics.³⁶

While this paper has been limited to the notions of biblical and liturgical Christianity, much more was at stake and argued in nineteenth and twentieth century America, matters of history as well as doctrine and practice. But as we read back over the Protestant literature in the passage of time, there are both continuities (similar theological and religious issues and argument) and discontinuities (for example, a startling decline in political fear and in pornographic tints to the literature). So, the argument is steady state in the present. On the evangelical side, even as some sign "Evangelicals and Catholics Together," current evangelical critics of amelioration of theological conflict such as James

³² Campbell and Purcell, 431-435.

³³ NY: Doubleday Image, 1990.1979.

³⁴ In Robert Bellah and Frederick Greenspahn, eds., *Uncivil Religion: Interreligious Hostility in America* (NY: Crossroad, 1987), 86-110.

³⁵ (Oxford UK: Blackwell Publishers 2001), 111-147.

³⁶ The introduction of critical history is hugely important in current evangelical-Roman Catholic relations, and is clearly among the conditions for the writing of the document "Evangelicals and Catholics Together (1993)" and, ironically, for the split among evangelicals on understanding the assertions in and horizons of the document as well as of the Reformation period itself. For a discussion see Shea, *The Lion and the Lamb*.

Armstrong, Michael Horton, and R.C. Sproul count on an anti-Catholic tradition in America running back through even through twentieth century theological moderates such as Paul Tillich and Reinhold Niebuhr to Boston's John Cotton in 1640.³⁷ Nevins and Campbell in the 19th century were not anomalies, and they keep very good company in the communion of saints. Recent downplaying of rectory and convent pornography and nativist political fear still leaves us knee-deep in theological criticism. Though some evangelicals have been led by association in the current culture wars to recognize some Christians in the Catholic church, just as many or more evangelical leaders remain standing where Luther stood, sternly proclaiming they can do no other, and look on millions upon millions of Catholics who are by evangelical standards only nominal Christians heading to Hell with the Hindus. And Catholic leaders, even in these ecumenical times, are as cautious and skeptical of biblical Christianity as they always have been.³⁸ These profound suspicions remain, even if enough on each side have shaken them off to enter honest discussion inside a new, if closely drawn, circle of trust.

³⁷ See John Cotton, *An Exposition upon the Thirteenth Chapter of the Revelation* (London: Henry Overton, 1655).

Photos:

Alexander Campbell. <http://www.mun.ca/rels/restmov/gallery/GALLERY.htm>

Archbishop John Purcell: ...<http://www2.eos.net/dajend/bishops.html>

Samuel Morse: ...<http://www.morsehistoricsite.org/>

Lyman beecher: ...<http://www.ohiohistorycentral.org/ohc/history/ocoa/pic/beecher1.shtml>

Bio: William M. Shea has taught at The Catholic University of America, the University of South Florida and Saint Louis University, and is now Director of the Center for Religion, Ethics and Culture at the College of the Holy

³⁸ See W. M. Shea, “Catholic Reaction to Fundamentalism” in *Theological Studies* 57 (1996): 264-285).

Cross. His most recent book, *The Lion and the Lamb: Evangelicals and Catholics in America*, was published in 2004 by Oxford University Press.

Summary of the article:

American evangelical-Catholic polemic in the 19th century raises the question whether the two groups ought to be regarded as distinct religions or, on the other, are in fact two legitimate expressions of the same faith. Proper weight must be given to the evangelical claim that the Catholic Church is not a Christian church at all and that Catholics, with some exceptions, are not Christians. When we regard the norms set up in each tradition we can question the Christian status of each from the point of view of the other. Once we put aside the special fears of American nativists and their Catholic opponents and turn to the theological argument alone in a classic expression of the clash in the Great Debate between Restorationist Alexander Campbell and John Purcell, Archbishop of Cincinnati, we see the apparently “essential differences” sharply drawn. The categories “biblical” and “liturgical” Christianity at least provide an initial description of those differences and can be used to specify the differences without deciding the case. The description is a helpful first step in the current efforts at a more productive and “Christian” relation between the two.