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Review: 'The Catholic Faith: An Introduction'

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Jewish intellectuals faced modernity) sees anti-Semitism as rooted in a kind of Jewish "angelism"—the presumption of total innocence on the part of Jews in relation to the historical phenomenon of anti-Semitism. Cuddihy asks, "What is it that enables Jews and Jewish spokesmen so often to occupy the moral high ground with such confidence?" Cuddihy thinks that explanations of anti-Semitism based simply on sociological theories of scapegoating are naive.

George Marsden treats the issue of creation versus evolution among evangelicals (Marsden is the magisterial cultural historian of American evangelicalism.) He sees a tendency to silence "the excluded middle" who might make a case for theist evolution, as Catholics and mainline Protestants do. He roots the perennial exclusion of a middle position in post-bellum Southern culture and its animus against change. David O'Brien similarly argues that "the middle ground" lost power in post-Vatican II American Catholicism. Finally, in a concluding overview chapter, Robert Bellah claims that the key tension in our culture today is that between tight- and loose-boundedness in group belonging. Bellah notes that loose-boundedness (lightly held group commitments) constitutes one of the major culture challenges to religion today. He also argues that "one of the reasons for our religious tolerance might be the existence of racism. Americans have been so preoccupied with drawing boundaries between the races that religious boundaries have seemed less important."

Uncivil Religion could serve as a useful background or supplementary reading in courses in American religious history or sociology of religion for upper-division graduates. Moreover, several of the essays (especially a contribution by Mark Noll of Wheaton College) suggest—against Wuthnow's optimism—that the potential for interreligious hostility remains more latent than eclipsed. Note, for example, the ease with which religious protest against the film, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, so easily elided into vulgar anti-Semitism. Religion remains a potent vehicle for group identity. Unfortunately, as this symposium demonstrates in its historical essays, tightly bounded groups usually need an out-group enemy to serve as a boundary marker.

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The Catholic Faith: An Introduction. By Lawrence S. Cunningham. New York: Paulist, 1987. v + 184 pages. \$4.95 (paper).

Faith Rediscovered: Coming Home to Catholicism. By Lawrence S. Cunningham. New York: Paulist, 1987. 99 pages. \$3.95 (paper).

In an earlier work, *The Catholic Heritage*, Lawrence Cunningham remarked, "There once was a very clear vision of what Catholicism was and what it wanted; today we grope for that vision again, but have not yet articulated what it is." In that book, as well as in *The Catholic Experience*, the author laid out much of the historical and thematic groundwork for constructing such a vision. In the works under review here, Cunningham builds upon this groundwork to produce clear, readable statements of the basic nature of Catholicism for two specific audiences. *The Catholic Faith: An Introduction* is intended primarily for people who for whatever reason have left the Catholic Church but who might

be open to coming back. It is also addressed to Catholics whose faith is tenuous and to anyone who might be interested in becoming Catholic.

Both of these works are characterized by a focusing of attention on the most fundamental principles of Catholicism. Cunningham avoids any temptation to dwell on controversial matters. He is more concerned in these works with the meaning of sacrament than with who is allowed to preside at the eucharist; he is more concerned with who Jesus is to Christians than with Jesus' consciousness of his own identity or with the exact nature of the resurrection; he is more concerned with how Catholics understand the relation of God, creation, and human beings than with distinguishing Catholicism from other denominations and religions. If one analyzed these works with Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* in mind, one could say that Cunningham concentrates mainly on that bedrock of matter that remains the same no matter how deep and significant a revolution might be.

This is not at all to suggest that Cunningham does not think that controversial matters are important. In both works he alludes to such issues with a proper seriousness and in some cases gets across a fairly strong suggestion of where he stands. His purpose, however, is not to explore such questions in depth but rather to communicate that one can be a Catholic of firm faith in God, grace, Church, sacraments, and the ultimate meaning of life without getting overly hung up in matters which, though important, should not ultimately be regarded as faith-threatening.

The Catholic Faith: An Introduction has much to recommend it for classroom use. Cunningham himself notes that this is one more offering in an area that has several reasonably good choices. Yet Cunningham's entry is to be applauded for combining the best elements of those on the market. It is a good length for an introductory text. It is inexpensive. It is readable while maintaining theological depth. It is original in its organization without being overly idiosyncratic. It is orthodox in the best sense of the word without any trace of traditionalism. It provides a good basis for a course while leaving plenty of room for a teacher to supplement on topics given scant treatment such as biblical criticism, church history, eschatology, and sexual ethics. The questions at the end of each chapter are obviously the fruit of classroom experience in getting the students personally involved by reflecting on what the material means to them.

Faith Rediscovered: Coming Home to Catholicism might for some people just turn out to be the helpful encouragement that Cunningham intends it to be. The book is notable for the author's indepth understanding of the many reasons why people leave and the hesitations they may have over coming back. In a clear and simple manner Cunningham makes the case for the Catholic Church in a way that allows the alienated Catholic to feel understood, welcomed, and treasured. He first concentrates on the basic meanings of faith, worship, sacramentality, tradition, and Christian living. He then gives practical suggestions for the returning Catholic, including the suitability of participating in a catechumenate program. One of his more enticing arguments is that there exists "a curious dynamic in the practice of the faith": if one would just take the step of getting involved, many of the things that are now giving one pause would likely fade away.

In both of these works Cunningham shows himself to be gifted with an ability to combine a faith perspective with an academically solid approach to Catholicism in a popularly accessible format. As he puts it, he treats his subject "with prickly love and a kind of cranky fidelity which is sometimes identified with faith."

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DENNIS M. DOYLE

Christian Foundations: An Introduction to Faith in Our Time. By Kathleen R. Fischer and Thomas N. Hart. New York: Paulist, 1986. v + 222 pages. \$9.95 (paper).

Fischer and Hart have written a concise and clear, yet comprehensive and compelling introduction to Christian faith in our time. *Christian Foundations* is addressed to anyone interested in understanding how Christian believers respond to the question of the existence of God—raised not only by our encounters with inexplicable evil and the many life-threatening dilemmas with which today's technology confronts us, but also by the sheer delight of our experience of so much unexpected good (ch. one). After a remarkably cogent summary of the atheist, agnostic, and theistic responses to the riddle of existence (ch. two), the authors present their understanding of the foundations for the Christian answer (chs. three through twelve).

The format is obviously geared to the undergraduate classroom or the parish discussion group, but it could also be profitable for anyone interested in thinking about the implications of Christian faith. Among the many assets of the text are its balance, readability, and organization. Fischer and Hart avoid the pitfalls of relativism and indecision without opting for a one-sided presentation of complex questions. The perceptive reader not only knows where the authors stand on controversial issues, but is also challenged (especially through the provocative discussion questions at the end of each chapter) to think critically and to take his or her own stand. Fischer and Hart provide an excellent first step into adult reflection on the essentials of Christian faith.

The skilled teacher might use *Christian Foundations* as the one text for an introductory course—making maximum use of the discussion questions and annotated bibliographies—or as a "first text" in a variety of lower level college courses. Since most colleges seem to require so few credits in theology, teachers are often teaching a "first course" even when doing so in some topic such as death and dying, world religions, sacraments, christology, the Gospels. *Christian Foundations* could serve as the introductory overview of the tradition for courses whose primary focus is more limited.

In addition, teachers will be grateful for a text which can serve as a model of explanatory prose and (for the most part) grammatical excellence. The annoying inconsistency in punctuation—commas and periods appear both within and without quotation marks—is regrettable. There are no notes, no index. I would have appreciated both.

It is the theological synthesis provided by Fischer and Hart which is, however, especially noteworthy. I applaud their appreciation of the mystery of the human person, the sacramentality of all creation; the importance of images