

IN REVIEW  
**FEATURE**

# Book falls short in look at media's anti-Catholicism

**Anti-Catholicism in the Media**, edited by Patrick Riley and Russell Shaw; Our Sunday Visitor Publishing (Huntington, Ind., 1993); 254 pp.; \$16.95.

Reviewed by Richard Philbrick  
Catholic News Service

*Anti-Catholicism in the Media* would be a better book if it did not stray so often from its subject. It would be even better if the subject were stated from the outset.

In fact, both the title and the subtitle — "an examination of whether elite news organizations are biased against the church" — are somewhat misleading. Only four media enterprises are examined, and while they are among the elite they are not necessarily representative of all elite news organizations.

The book is a report of a study sponsored by the Knights of Columbus and the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights coupled with essays and comments presented at a conference on media coverage of the Catholic Church held after



the study was completed. The study was conducted by the Center for Media and Public Affairs, a nonprofit agency.

Findings were based on news items published in or broadcast by "The CBS Evening News," *Time* magazine, *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* — three enterprises with strong roots in New York City and the fourth only a shuttle flight away from it.

Researchers found that "on most controversies," including birth control, the role of women and minorities in the church, dissent, and priestly celibacy, "the church came out on the losing side

of the issue debate." They also said that the four enterprises depicted the church as "a beleaguered authority struggling to enforce its traditions and decrees on a reluctant constituency."

The sampling for the study was done in three five-year blocks, 1964-68, 1974-78 and 1984-88. Coverage grew increasingly negative over the decades as "official church teachings were promoted less frequently and were challenged more often when they did appear," the report stated.

While there are plenty of examples of anti-Catholicism in the news media — editorial cartoonists being particularly guilty at times — what's wrong here is that the findings of this particular study cannot be applied to the media in general. One conference participant who knows better was way off the mark when he said of the four organizations "each is representative of the medium in question: joined together they are representative of the media as a whole." That is like saying that an armored personnel carrier, a tank, a fire engine,

and a long bus that bends in the middle are representative of vehicles on the nation's highways.

My own conclusion is that much of what the study uncovered and labelled anti-Catholicism was not aimed at the church specifically but is part of today's easy disregard for religion which R. Booth Fowler, University of Wisconsin political science professor, has termed "modern Manhattan secularism." That attitude — anti-Catholic and anti-religion in general — has just begun to spread to the hinterland.

At most the report and the conference writings are an indictment of the four media enterprises examined. Certainly, they do not constitute a persuasive finding that the entire media are guilty of conscious anti-Catholicism.

Philbrick is Catholic News Service book review coordinator.

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# Shallow comedy glosses over characters' serious flaws

By Gerri Pare  
Catholic News Service

NEW YORK — Parading as PG-rated family entertainment is the problematic *My Father the Hero* (Touchstone).

Parisian divorced dad Gerard Depardieu shows up in New York to whisk his 14-year-old daughter Nicole (Katherine Heigl) off for a long-awaited Bahamas vacation.

There she tells a handsome 17-year-old island boy (Dalton James) that dad is her lover. Knowing how to manipulate his guilt feelings about being an absentee father, she convinces dad he must play along with her ploy to make the lad jealous.

Embroidering her tale with intimations of drug abuse, a prostitute mother and an imprisoned father, she keeps the lad spellbound.



**Cite Films**  
Gérard Depardieu (left), Dalton James (right), and Katherine Heigl star in the romantic comedy *My Father the Hero*, based on the French *Mon Père, Ce Héros*.

The comedy is centered on how the other resort guests are scandalized by the supposed affair and spurn dad, who is initially unaware of his unsavory reputation. His rendition of "Thank Heaven for Little Girls" on amateur talent night is not appreciated.

Though the characters are essentially sweet-natured, the central premise in

director Steve Miner's comedy is far from funny. It aims at eliciting sympathy for a father who relinquishes his parental responsibility to provide moral guidance for his daughter. Indeed, he tacitly affirms her lies and then goes on to utter new ones of his own, thus setting a terrible example.

Even after the truth emerges, dad prompts her to tell the boy, "I can't imagine my life without you," and similar sentiments more appropriate to adults.

With its bizarre image of a weak-willed dad seen as a hero, the humor is more out-of-whack than comically wacky.

Due to a sympathetic depiction of deceit, sexual innuendo and fleeting rear nudity, the U.S. Catholic Conference classification is A-III — adults. The Motion Picture Association of America rating is PG — parental guidance suggested.



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